

Author's Note: Well, here we are again. Just like I promised, since The Divine Plan has reached 200,000 views and is complete, I'm posting my next story. When I first set out to write The Divine Plan, I don't think I ever really planned on writing another story. But here we are. Taking into account a lot of the lessons I learned from writing my first story, this one will be much more lighthearted and fun...at least, that's the plan. As a result, I will admit that there may be plot holes or discrepancies with canon. While I do not plan for them and make every attempt to avoid them, I am only human and may forget things. That said, I have done much more research for this story and have actually planned everything out completely, unlike what I did last time. Due to the fact that everything is outlined now, the first five chapters of this story are much shorter than later chapters. That doesn't mean they are particularly short, just shorter than the chapters will be later. This is due to the fact that the first few chapters are introductory chapters, setting up for the main story. As you read chapter one, I don't think there will be anyone out there who will be able to see what the main plot of this story is. That will come later on after the groundwork has been laid.

When developing this story, I considered several things, but many of them came back to one question: how far can I take a small event and have it have broad implications? In other words, how drastic can the consequences of one small action be? You will see the beginning of that in this chapter.

There are a few other things I want to mention here as well before we begin. The first is that, for a number of reasons, this story is set in modern times. Harry's fifth year is ending in 2011 in this story. Timing will also play a part in the story, hence the time stamps scattered throughout the story.

Another note I wanted to bring up is the way the characters are portrayed. Whereas in The Divine Plan, Harry and Hermione were technically adults with the mind of an adult, that is not the case in this story. As a result, I am writing them as exactly what they are: teenagers. Confused teenagers. So when I wrote this chapter, and the rest of the story, I considered, at least with regards to Harry, how I would have felt in his shoes when I was his age. So, the characterization of Harry and Hermione may be different from what I have written before, making them more innocent. This is intentional.

But the other thing I want to mention is that the chapter titles in this story will follow a common theme. I will not say what that theme is, but I'm hoping that a few of you out there in Internetland will be able to guess. Once someone guesses it in a review, it won't really be a secret anymore, so I'll let the cat out of the bag. But at that point, if anyone can guess the name of the next chapter (or each subsequent chapters as we go along), then they'll get an Internet cookie from me (or just a smiley). Think of it as a kind of game to involve you, my treasured reader.

As always, I do want to mention that I do not own the rights to Harry Potter, or anything else in this story that may be copyrighted material or intellectual property of another individual. These are somebody else's toys. I'm just playing around with them for a little while.

So, once again, I thank you for reading this long note and this story in general, and please review it if you like it. Now, without further ado, let's get started. Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to Stealing Time.

Chapter 1

It's Late

June 9, 2011

10:47 PM

With a frustrated sigh, fifteen year old Harry Potter looked up from his well-worn copy of A History of Magic and glanced around the nearly empty Gryffindor common room. The flickering light from the dying fire cast an eerie glow on the crimson and gold tapestries that adorned the walls, lending an air of sophistication to the room as the shadows the room's occupants danced on the walls. Aside from the occasional hushed whisper from the two students in the room, the only sounds that could be heard was the crackling of the fire and the soft rustle of turning pages. As Harry looked around the room, he saw a pair of first year students rise from their seat on one of the sofas and make their way upstairs to the dormitory. Seated at a small square table in the corner of the common room, Harry was now alone in the room with his companion, who was seated across the table.

With her head buried in her copy of the same textbook, sixteen year old Hermione Granger sat directly across from Harry, a look of intense concentration etched on her face. From Harry's perspective, the low light from the fire framed his friend's bushy hair with an almost angelic radiance.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione lifted her head from her book and blinked tiredly. "How's it going for you, Harry?" she asked.

Harry rolled his eyes in response. "I don't know how I expected to learn the entire history of magic with a few days of review," he complained.

"Well, if you had paid attention in class and started earlier..." Hermione trailed off.

"I think you must be the only person who has managed to stay awake through an entire History of Magic class with Binns, Hermione," he argued. "You can't hold me to that standard, it's just not fair!"

"But what about starting your revising earlier?" she pressed.

"I...well..." he began, searching for a logical argument. "Maybe it wasn't the best idea to wait," he finished sheepishly, looking back down at his textbook.

Seeing the look of resignation on his face, Hermione closed her book loudly. "I think that's enough for tonight," she announced as Harry looked up again. "Harry, I know our History O.W.L. is tomorrow, but I think we've done enough for now. Regardless of what I said a moment ago, I really am proud of you for putting as much effort into studying as you have over the past few days. If only I could get Ron to put out a fraction of that effort..." she scowled as she thought of how Ron had skived off in order to experiment with the Room of Requirement, coming back late and heading straight up to bed. After seeing the Room had conformed to the needs of Dumbledore's Army, Ron had become enthralled by the possibilities, and had taken to challenging the room to come up with more and more elaborate creations, culminating lately in the stadium from the Quidditch World Cup.

"Ugh," Harry groaned. "Why do I get the feeling that this isn't going to go well?"

Hermione smiled. "Unfortunately, Harry, since studying is somewhat new to you, you haven't experienced this yet. For me at least, the more I study and revise, the less confident I am. That doesn't make me any less prepared, I just feel less prepared, like I should have studied more. I just get the feeling that I won't do well. Maybe it's due to over thinking the problem, and maybe it's because I've been cramming so much information into my head that I think that I won't be able to remember it all. I'm not sure. But I do know from experience that there is a point at which you have to stop studying and just accept that you will do as well as you do."

"Yet you're the one who always worries and bites her nails in anticipation of her latest marks," Harry pointed out with a grin. "And you always complain if you ever get anything less than a perfect O."

Hermione blushed and turned away slightly at his remarks. "Maybe I have been a bit...preoccupied at times," she admitted. "But I can't help but be anxious to see how I actually did on an exam, even if I know I can't control it anymore once I put down the quill."

"Right," Harry replied as he closed his book as well.

"The best thing to do is to just do your best. We've been going over the material for a while now, so I know you'll do better on the exam now than you would have done a few days ago. At least keep that in mind, Harry." She rose and placed her book in her bag, which was resting on the floor next to the table. She then picked up her backpack and walked around the table to Harry.

"Goodnight, Harry," she said softly. Then she did something that she had only done once before. She leaned down and kissed him softly on the cheek. "Good luck. And don't worry; I'm sure you'll do just fine."

With a small smile, she turned and climbed the stairs to the girl's dormitory, leaving Harry utterly alone in the common room.

Left alone, Harry slowly raised his hand to his face and rubbed his cheek idly. "What was that?" he thought. "Was it just for luck? Or was it something more? Nah, Hermione isn't a devious little witch

who would play with a bloke like that. She would come out and tell them directly. Wouldn't she? Wait, why am I even thinking about this all of a sudden. I mean, it was just a good luck kiss...that Hermione never usually does..."

More confused than ever, Harry packed up his supplies and threw his bag over his shoulder. But he still couldn't shake the confusion from his mind. "I've got to ask someone," he decided. Suddenly, he was struck by inspiration, and with a literal snap of his fingers, he rushed upstairs to his dormitory.

After creeping past the other sleeping students and rummaging around in his trunk, Harry returned to the empty common room, carrying a small object. The fading light from the glowing embers in the hearth reflected mystically off of the small mirror in Harry's hand.

"Sirius Black," he whispered into the mirror distractedly, his mind still wandering to what had transpired a moment before. There was no response for a moment, which caused Harry to glance up at the clock on the wall in worry. He had failed to consider that Sirius may have been asleep by this point.

"Harry!" Sirius's jovial face said from the mirror suddenly. "Uh, oh. What's her name?" he asked.

"Huh?" Harry replied in confusion. "Who?"

Sirius suddenly looked several years older as he looked carefully at Harry. "Why the girl who's carrying your sprog of course. What's her name? It can't be Hermione. It's not Hermione...is it?"

Harry, still distracted, nodded. "Yeah, it's Hermione."

"You knocked up Hermione?" Sirius bellowed.

"Wait, what?" Harry asked quickly, shaken out of his stupor. "No, Sirius, I...Hermione and I...we didn't...I mean..."

Seeing the panic on his godson's face, Sirius's features immediately relaxed. "Okay, Harry, so you didn't knock up Hermione. That's a relief. For a moment there, I thought that-

"Why would you think that that was why I was calling? Of all things, why that?"

Sirius reached behind his head and began scratching idly. "Well, you see Harry, when I first saw you, you had that look on your face. It's a look I remember seeing a lot of back when I was in Hogwarts whenever a bloke would go through a pregnancy scare."

"Was it whenever you looked in a mirror, Sirius?" Harry asked cheekily, fully recovered from his panic at Sirius's accusations.

"So, Harry, what is wrong with the lovely Miss Granger then?" Sirius asked, dodging Harry's question. "This is the first time since I gave you that mirror that you've used it. It's got to be something important. That was kind of the first thing that came to mind though..."

"Leave it to you to jump that kind of conclusion, Sirius. But that's not it at all. See, Hermione and I were getting ready for our History of Magic O.W.L. tomorrow, and it wasn't going well. I just wasn't getting it. So we called it quits for the night. But then, as she was heading up to her room, she kissed me goodnight on the cheek."

Sirius was silent for a moment before speaking. "Okay," he began slowly, "is this the first time she's done this?"

"Well, no. It's actually the second time. The first time was at the end of last year at the station. She kissed me goodbye on the cheek then too. Granted, that time it was because we weren't going to see each other again for a long time, so it made sense then. But this time is different. It seemed different, almost like it was out of place. It was like she was doing it just for the sake of doing it."

"So what's the problem then?"

"I mean, nobody's ever done that before her. Granted, there was Cho, but that was just wet and awkward. Aside from her, Hermione's the only one who's done something like this."

"So what's the problem then?" Sirius repeated.

"Fine! I don't know what it means!" Harry admitted exasperatedly.

"That's better then. So let's talk about it, shall we? Let's start with what you think it means."

"I don't know. I mean, it could have just been for luck, but I'm not sure. What if it isn't? I just can't figure it out!"

"What makes you think that this little peck was for anything more than luck? Has she ever given you any reason to think that she may like you as more than a friend?"

"Well, no," Harry admitted uncomfortably. "Do you really think it was just for luck?"

"Harry, I think you're reading too much into this. I can't help but think of the great muggle author Shakespeare, when he wrote 'The lady dost protest too much, methinks.' Not that I'm saying that you're a lady, but the principle still stands."

"I'm just trying to figure it out," Harry protested. "Wait. Since when do you read Shakespeare?"

"Actually, it was your mother who tried to introduce us Marauders to him. She only succeeded in getting Remus to read anything he wrote, but I do remember that Remus used that one line on your mother at one point."

"So you've never actually read anything by him?"

"Of course not, Harry. I've got an image to maintain here! But really, don't worry about it. I'm willing to bet that it was nothing more than a good luck kiss. I really think you're making more of this than you need to."

"Fine," Harry sighed with a mixture of relief and despondency. "I'll take your word for it. Rumor has it that you were quite the womanizer back in your day."

"Back in my day?" Sirius repeated in an offended tone. "I'll have you know that I still have a way with the ladies. Just the other day, I was with out, disguised with Remus, and-

"Wait. Are you sure the correct word is 'ladies?' If I have to ask Remus about your romantic qualities, then something must be weird here."

His face flushed red with embarrassment, Sirius scowled at Harry through the mirror. "Harry, don't forget that just because you're far away in a magical castle doesn't mean I can't track you down and injure you bodily. Remember that and I'll let that comment slide this one time."

Harry didn't make eye contact with Sirius following his thinly-veiled threat, his wandering eyes finding the clock on the wall. The time was quickly approaching midnight. His exam was scheduled for ten o'clock in the morning.

"You know, these mirrors remind me of all of Dudley's computers he's had over the years," Harry observed absently. "Of course, the Dursley's would never let me use them or even touch them. But just using these mirrors reminds me of what I would sometimes see him doing, chatting with his friends using a camera he had."

"He had a what?" Sirius asked, confused. "Is that one of those muggle marvels that Arthur is so enthralled by?"

"Yeah," Harry replied with a chuckle. "I forgot how far apart the magical and muggle world are sometimes. A computer is a muggle device that...well...it's actually really difficult to explain to someone who really has no grasp of the muggle world. No offense, Sirius."

"Oh, of course I shouldn't take offense at that," Sirius responded sarcastically.

"Don't pay it any mind, Sirius. At any rate, it's late, and I have my History O.W.L. in the morning."

"Good luck on that, Harry. Make sure that Binns doesn't haunt you in your sleep and rot your mind with his ramblings."

"Such a pleasant image to fall asleep to," Harry muttered with a roll of his eyes. "Good night, Sirius."

"Good night, Harry. Oh, and Harry," he added, "thanks for calling. You have no idea how happy I am that you finally wanted to talk to me. Much more so that you came to me with a problem."

Harry gave Sirius a small smile. "I'm sorry it took so long. I just didn't want to give you any ideas and have you run off on some fool's errand. You are still a wanted man, after all."

"Unfortunately, you're correct, Harry. But anyway, good night, and good luck on your exam. By the way, to disconnect the mirror, just tap the top edge."

With a nod to Sirius, Harry moved to tap the mirror and end the call.

"Oh! Harry, one last thing," Sirius called out quickly. "Think about what I said. I really think you're over thinking the whole situation with Hermione. But I really think you should think about what you want. I get the feeling that friendship may not be enough for you, even if you aren't ready to admit it, or even able to realize it." Harry opened his mouth to protest, but was cut off. "Just keep it in mind. Good night." With that, the mirror went blank, disconnected at the other end.

Tucking the mirror into the pocket in his oversized jeans, Harry headed back up to his dormitory. Once upstairs, he returned the mirror to his trunk before changing into a large t-shirt and shorts.

"Girls are so bloody hard to figure out," he complained quietly to himself as he climbed into his bed, closing the curtains behind him. As he crawled under the blankets, he considered Sirius's words more carefully.

It's just not something she usually does, Harry rationalized. I mean, that's all it is. What did she expect me to think? I'm only fifteen years old, it's not like I know what everything a girl does means. Then again, she did go to the Yule Ball with Krum last year. And her constant bickering with Ron could be their form of some pathetic mating ritual or something...Gah! It's so confusing!

It could have just been a good-luck kiss, another voice within his mind argued, sounding somewhat irritated. Why are you trying to convince yourself otherwise? Has she given you any reason to?

Maybe Sirius is right. Maybe you do secretly fancy Hermione and are just trying to justify it any way you can.

Shut up! Harry argued back to himself. I'm just trying to figure it out is all.

More like trying to overanalyze, the other voice shot back. Just see how she acts tomorrow. Maybe that'll give you an idea about what she meant. Until then, I'm tired and need my sleep.

Harry's mind went silent after that. The only sound in the dormitory was the sound of Ron's incessant snoring.

Wait, was I just arguing with the voices in my head? Harry asked himself. I must be crazier than I thought. Maybe it'd be a good idea to just forget this whole thing ever happened.

With that, Harry turned over onto his side, tucked a hand under his pillow, and drifted off to sleep.

End of Chapter 1

A/N: So that was chapter one which, along with the next few chapters, are somewhat short and form a sort of introduction to the story itself. So don't judge the full tale just yet. That said, please review and let me know what you think of this first chapter or what I need to change (at least technically, not with the story). I am trying to keep the characters more in character this time, so Harry and Hermione will act their age for the most part. I also wanted to have more fun with the interactions between Harry and Sirius, so this chapter is the beginning of that. Anyway, leave a review, or two or three. Otherwise, stay tuned. I plan on keeping a relatively regular update schedule, that should be at least once per week, considering the fact that I am several chapters ahead at this point. So stay tuned!

Chapter 2

Don't Lose Your Head

June 10, 2011

7:48 AM

The morning sun streamed through the separation between the curtains surrounding Harry's bed, waking him from his restless slumber. Try as he might, he had not been able to take his mind off of the events of the previous night. Throughout the night, he could not turn his mind away from analyzing and reanalyzing Hermione's innocuous kiss in the cheek the previous night. It just seemed so out of character to him that he didn't know what to think. However, as Harry sat up in his bed and stretched, he considered what that small voice in the back of his mind had said the night before, and decided to see how Hermione acted that day and go from there.

Opening the surround on his bed, Harry stepped onto the cold stone floor, hopping briefly before quickly sitting back down on his bed and pulling on some socks. One of the downsides of wearing Dudley's hand-me-downs was the lack of slippers. Because his portly cousin had never been an early riser, he had never seen the need to warm his feet in the morning, and had therefore never owned a pair of slippers.

His graying, holey socks now adorning his feet, Harry once again tested the floor, finding it much more bearable than before. As he turned toward his trunk, Harry saw movement coming from Ron's bed, as the redhead began to stir. Quickly, Harry opened his trunk and rifled around, pulling out various garments. A moment later, when his wardrobe for the day had been chosen, Harry closed his trunk and gathered his clothes in his arms. Ron was just beginning to rise from his bed at this point.

"Sorry, mate," Harry began, "but I'm gonna get the shower first. I know from experience not to let you go first. It always seems like the heating charm on the tap has worn off for the day after you're done. I'll be out in a few minutes though, don't worry." Before Ron could form a coherent reply, Harry dashed off toward the shower.

He returned ten minutes later with a towel around his neck, patting his cheeks.

"Is that...aftershave?" Ron asked, gathering his clothes for the day in his arms.

Harry turned to hide his blush as he threw his towel vaguely near his bed.

"I...er..." Harry stammered, failing to hide his obvious embarrassment.

"Since when do you wear aftershave, mate?" Ron asked. Then his eyes went wide as he broke into a wide smile. "Guys," he began, addressing the two others who were still in the room, Neville and Seamus, "I think Harry's got his eye on someone. Look! He even tied his tie perfectly and everything."

True enough, Harry had tied his tie tightly, as opposed to his usual standard of a loose knot hanging from his neck lazily.

Thinking quickly, Harry improvised. "You're right," he replied, sounding more confident than he felt. "After all, Griselda Marchbanks is the one who'll be overseeing today's exam. I hear that she's a real cougar," he finished slyly. "I was hoping to make a good impression."

"Cou...cougar?" Ron stammered, swallowing audibly. "But she must be...over a hundred and thirty!" His response drew a loud laugh from Seamus and a light, nervous chuckle from Neville, both of whom left the dorm immediately, disregarding Ron's previous statements.

Taking advantage of the situation, Harry attempted to distract Ron further. "Mate, there might not be any breakfast left if you don't hurry and get in the shower," he pointed out.

"Oh! You're right," Ron said quickly, his eyes widening with fear. "Harry," he added as he walked toward the door, "can you wait for me before going down to the Great Hall?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure. What for?"

"Well I just figure that there's one less person down there, which means that there should be more food when I get there. See you in a few minutes!"

The door to the dormitory slammed behind him, leaving Harry with a look of complete disbelief on his face.

"Are you kidding me?" he asked the empty room as he sat down on his bed to tie his shoes for the day. After finishing, he trudged down the stairs to the common room, only to be greeted by a cheery voice.

"Good morning, Harry," Hermione called from her seat on one of the sofas, book perched in her lap.

"Morning, Hermione," Harry replied tentatively, sitting down on the opposite end of the sofa. As he sat down, Harry couldn't help but notice that Hermione seemed to scoot closer, despite the fact that her head was still bowed over her book.

"Ready for the History exam today?" she asked earnestly as she seemed to get closer still.

"Um, sure," Harry answered awkwardly.

At his answer, Hermione closed her book and looked up at him concernedly. "What's wrong, Harry?" she asked, her voice laced with care.

Harry thought quickly. "Late night, I suppose. I didn't go to sleep until a while after you left." It wasn't technically a lie, so he was happy with his answer.

"Oh," she responded simply. She placed her book in her bag and slung it over her shoulder as she stood. "Are you ready to head down to the Great Hall?" she asked.

"Actually, Ron asked me to wait for him. He seems convinced that if I go down there now, I'll eat the last of the food and there won't be any for him. I think he's barmy myself, but then again..."

"This is Ron we're talking about," they finished in unison, cracking up in laughter as they did so. The youngest Weasley male's

obsession with food had become a running joke with them, and they took any opportunity to ridicule him for it.

"Did I hear my name?" a voice called from the stairs. Harry and Hermione turned just as Ron reached the bottom of the staircase, his hair still damp from an apparently rushed shower.

"You didn't waste any time I see," Hermione observed sarcastically. "It looks like you can't even be bothered to dry your hair. Or tie your shoes, for that matter," she added as she took in his complete appearance.

Ron shrugged with indifference. "Who cares? There's food to be had downstairs. To the Great Hall!" he declared dramatically, pointing towards the portrait-hole.

Hermione rolled her eyes in disgust at his antics as the three set off. "Ron, why do I get the impression that your brain isn't stored in your head, but in your stomach instead?" she asked.

"Oh come off it, Hermione," Ron argued. "I need all the energy I can get to maintain my sleek, strapping physique." He puffed out his chest for emphasis as they walked, causing Harry to snort in laughter.

"Strapping, Ron?" Hermione countered. "I'm not sure that's quite the right word. I've yet to see dozens of young witches lining up for you, so I doubt strapping is the correct description. Yes, you may have a fast metabolism, but your eating habits are disgusting. So you can count me out of joining that lineup."

Harry's ears perked up at her last comment, which seemed to cast doubt on one of the points during his argument with himself the night before. But he stamped down his interest immediately, convincing himself that there was no reason he should get excited.

"Well I never asked you join anyway, Hermione," Ron retorted. "I mean-"

"Guys," Harry interrupted, hoping to head off another of their famous rows. "Do we really need to do this now? You aren't even arguing

over anything important. Besides, we have more important things to worry about, like our exam that's in a couple of hours."

"Merlin, Harry, it sounds like you're turning into Hermione or something. Focusing on exams. It's barmy I tell you."

"He's right, you know," Hermione admitted to Ron with a sigh.

"Of course I am. I'm always right," Harry boasted jokingly.

"Stop it, Harry. You're not helping anymore. I just mean we shouldn't be arguing, because then that'll be all that's on our minds during the exam. This is one exam we can't afford to do poorly on."

"You say that about every exam," Ron complained. "And I've yet to see you proven right on that, so I've stopped paying attention when you say it."

"I've noticed. I also noticed you couldn't be bothered to study at all for the History O.W.L," she pointed out.

"What's the point? We both know that we'll fail it anyway, no matter how much we study. History's useless, everybody knows that!"

"So you want to make your own mistakes rather than learn from those made by others?"

"Guys?" Harry interjected once more. "You're doing it again."

"Sorry Harry," Hermione conceded. "It's just that I can't stand to talk to him sometimes."

Ron opened his mouth to argue, but Harry cut him off. "Ron, don't even say anything. I don't want to have to stop another argument."

"I...uh...I was just gonna say that we're here," Ron finished lamely, pointing out that the three had been standing outside the doors to the Great Hall for some time now.

All three blushed lightly before Harry opened the door, allowing Hermione into the expansive room, followed closely by Ron.

The population of the Great Hall was thinning as the trio entered, with various students collecting their belongings and leaving.

"There better be something left!" Ron exclaimed, as he ran towards the trio's usual seats at the Gryffindor table. Harry and Hermione exchanged a look of incredulity at his behavior, before Harry simply shrugged his shoulders.

As Ron piled bacon, eggs, sausage links, and toast onto his plate, Harry and Hermione sat on the opposite side of the table, grabbing empty plates as they did so. Hermione reached for an assortment of various fruits to supplement her modest serving of scrambled eggs, while Harry focused on the bacon and eggs, grabbing a sole apple to compliment them.

"Honestly, Ron, I don't know how you can eat like that and still stay as thin as you are," Hermione remarked.

"You said it yourself," Ron replied, his mouth full of a grotesque mixture of egg, bacon, and toast. "Fast metabolism."

"Close your mouth when you talk too," Hermione commanded. But Ron ignored her and focused the entirety of his attention on the meal at hand.

"He's insufferable," Hermione complained quietly to Harry as she pulled out her copy of *A History of Magic*. "He'll be completely oblivious to us for the rest of breakfast. I might as well take advantage of the peace and quiet." Taking a small bite of egg, Hermione opened her book and began to read.

"You're still cramming?" Harry asked absently as he peered over Hermione's shoulder at the book.

"I just want to make sure I remember everything," Hermione explained, never looking up from her tome. "Since Ron is currently gracing us with his silence, I wanted to be somewhat productive."

"And talking with me wouldn't be productive?" Harry joked.

Hermione's head jerked up in abject horror at Harry's comment. "Oh, Harry! I'm sorry if I made you feel that way! I didn't mean to!"

"Hermione!" he interrupted. "Relax. It was a joke. I was just trying to make small talk. I wasn't offended at all. You don't need to overreact."

"I'm sorry, Harry," she sighed. "I'm just a little distracted is all."

"O.W.L.s?"

"Partly," she replied cryptically. "But it's not really important. I'm sorry if I overreacted or anything."

Harry waved her comments off. "So what's on the docket now?" he asked curiously, changing the subject.

"Well, I was just trying to brush up on the goblin war of 1873," she replied naturally, although her small sigh of relief did not go unnoticed to Harry.

"Which one was that again?" Harry asked as Hermione tucked a strand of wayward hair behind her ear.

"Well, remember this one was centered around the value of the galleon," Hermione explained, launching into full lecture mode. "Wizards of the time alleged that the goblins were manipulating the value of the galleon, and were thereby creating deflation."

"...and that's a bad thing, right?" Harry asked, confused.

"Honestly, Harry. I thought we went over this last night." She took a deep breath before forging on. "If the goblins were really creating deflation, that would make the value of their holdings of galleons go up. Remember, with deflation, the same amount of money will buy more stuff."

"Then how is that bad? Why is it worth starting a war about?"

"It all has to do with international politics. Back in the nineteenth century, wizarding Britain was, at least culturally and developmentally, very close to the muggle world. As a result, as was the case in the muggle world, a large amount of trade occurred between various magical communities across Europe. Each one, however, has their own currency. In order to create this deflation, the goblins had, at least according to the wizards at the time,

hoarded large amounts of galleons so as to drive up the value of those in circulation. In Britain, this drove down prices, but also meant that fewer galleons were in circulation. In other words, there was less money to go around. So when magical Britain went to trade with, say, magical France, they were not able to buy as much. The same happened if a wizard wanted to travel abroad and needed to convert their galleons. They would only get a little back in exchange. The rising price of imports hurt the economy in magical Britain, forcing the wizards of the time to find a scapegoat. They found it in the goblins."

"So what happened in the end?"

"Another treaty, of course. This time, an independent board comprised of goblins and wizards was formed to control the value of the currency. But there never was an answer about whether the goblins were manipulating the price of the galleon or not."

"Dear Merlin, Hermione. Where did you learn all of that? Or, more to the point, where did you learn so much about economics? I don't remember that being covered in any of our books."

Hermione shrugged. "The goblin incident was in our textbook. The rest I just gathered from reading *The Times* during the summer and picking up bits and pieces here and there."

Harry threw an arm around Hermione's shoulder. "And that's why we love you," he said with a light squeeze. "Somehow, you just know everything. That's how we've survived as long as we have. I would have been dead without you last year, what with the tournament and all."

As he finished speaking, the clock in the Great Hall struck 9 AM, deep chimes ringing out through the cavernous space. As the sound faded away, the food on the tables began to disappear slowly, starting with the emptier parts of the room and working towards the remaining students.

A moment later, Ron's plate disappeared as well, despite the fact that it was still full.

"Hey! I was still eating!" he exclaimed.

"Ron! That was your fourth plate of food!" Hermione cried. "You'd think you would've had enough by now!"

"Anyway," Harry interrupted loudly once again, getting both of their attention. "I really think I need to start keeping track of how many times I can interrupt one of your arguments. Maybe I'll play a game with myself to see what my high score can be."

Both Ron and Hermione glared at him, causing Harry to chuckle.

"Come on. I think the disappearing food is a not-too-subtle indication that we shouldn't be in here anymore. I'm sure that they'll start getting the Great Hall ready for the O.W.L.s soon, since it starts in less than an hour."

"Oh, you're right, Harry!" Hermione confirmed. "I still need to go over the invention of the magical printing press and how it—"

"No you don't," Harry announced. "You said it yourself last night, if you keep studying, you'll just over think the exam. You studied during breakfast, but now I think we just need to relax before the exam."

The ticking of the massive clock in the Great Hall was the only sound that could be heard aside from the occasional scratching of quills. Harry tapped the top of his quill against his chin absently as he looked up from his parchment and around the room. He was seated toward the middle of the Great Hall, the massive house tables replaced with long rows of desks, each separated by about two meters. In front of him, Harry could see Hermione hunched over her desk, writing furiously. To his right, Ron was chewing on the tip of his quill in nervousness, bending the quill as he did so. As Harry watched, the quill snapped, sending a few droplets of ink flying. With a panicked look on his face, Ron grabbed the short stub that was once the end of his quill, and awkwardly tried to position it in his hand so that he could write. Harry could only speculate as to how poor his handwriting would look now.

Harry glanced back down at his desk, which was covered by two piles of parchment and an ink bottle. He had so far managed to work his way through seven of the thirteen pages of parchment in just over one hour of the two hour block allotted. However, as he looked

back down at his current page, he remembered why he had looked away in the first place.

Compare and contrast the treaty that ended the Goblin Rebellion of 1549 and the Third Treaty of Stonehenge. What tenets of each treaty still have political ramifications today? List three similarities and differences, as well as three examples of the treaties' relevancy today.

Harry was stumped. He could not remember anything about either the Goblin Rebellion of 1549 or the Third Treaty of Stonehenge. If only he could see Hermione's parchment, he was sure he could glean a few ideas to start an answer. That was all he needed really, just a place to start.

At a loss for an answer, Harry looked down to the next question, which, thankfully, seemed to require a much shorter answer, at least from the appearance of the space given for the answer.

Rawgwog's Folly, the battle that ended the 1718 goblin civil war, took place in the massive goblin mines under the muggle town of Doncaster. What was the name of the opposing goblin general who defeated Rawgwog and his forces?

This was one that Harry knew. He actually remembered reading about the goblin civil war the night before, before he was distracted. Putting his quill to his parchment, he began to write in the space provided.

General Gwargon, he scratched into his parchment in his usual lazy scrawl.

Finishing his answer, Harry breathed a sigh of relief at answering another question.

Suddenly, his vision exploded in a blinding white light, as his forehead erupted in excruciating pain. As Harry dropped his quill and fell out of his seat onto the stone floor, he became light-headed and felt as though he were drifting away from his body.

That feeling lasted only a brief moment as the extreme pain lifted and the white light began to clear. However, instead of being

greeted by the sight of the Great Hall, Harry was instead treated to the sight of a long, smooth corridor. However, this corridor was not unfamiliar, as Harry remembered it from his vision involving Arthur Weasley earlier in the term. This time though, he was once again moving down the corridor, and through the mysterious door at its end.

On the other side of the door, Harry found a massive, cavernous room lined with countless shelves. Against his will, Harry continued to move through the room, his body seemingly not under his own control. He could, however, turn his head, and watch the shelves as they passed by, one by one.

As he watched the one particular shelf as it passed by his right side, Harry suddenly stopped moving. Slowly, Harry turned his head to look to his left.

There, on the floor, was a familiar form; one that he had just spoken to the night before. His godfather, Sirius, lay trembling on the floor, blood seeping from his nostrils and from the corner of his mouth.

As Harry's eyes traced his godfather's prone form, they stopped as they saw a single black boot perched atop Sirius's back, holding him down. Harry followed the boot upward until his eyes rested on the savage, snake-like visage of his nemesis, Lord Voldemort.

"He is still alive, Harry," his nemesis hissed menacingly. "You can still save him...if you hurry."

"Harry!" he heard from behind him. He quickly turned his head, only to find nothing aside from the two figures currently in front of him.

"Harry!" he heard again. This time he could tell that the voice was distinctly female.

"Remember, Harry," the hissing voice continued. "Remember that we are in the Department of Mysteries. We'll be waiting."

With that, Harry's vision once again exploded in a painful white light, as his scar once again flared up in pain. The pain was once again only temporary, as it quickly subsided once more. This time, however, instead of seeing a dark, sinister room, Harry was greeted with a pair of shimmering brown eyes.

"Harry!" Hermione squealed, "he's awake. Everybody, he's awake!"

Despite being startled by her excitement, Harry couldn't take his eyes off of hers. He slowly lifted himself onto his elbows and looked around the room distractedly. It seemed as though the entire population of the Great Hall was surrounding him, watching with concern.

"Easy, Harry," Hermione advised gently, placing a hand on his back to help him up. "That was a pretty nasty fall, and it looks like you hit your head pretty hard. What happened?"

Everything suddenly rushed back to him. The vision. Sirius.

"I've got to get out of here," he said weakly as he struggled to rise to his feet. He felt Hermione's arm as it wrapped around his torso to help him up. With Hermione's help, Harry began to trudge towards the doors to the Great Hall. Ron was not far behind.

"Lavender," Hermione yelled, "turn in my exam. I was done anyway," she mumbled at the end.

As the trio exited the Great Hall, they could hear Madame Marchbanks calling for order and commanding the students to return to their seats.

Once outside with the doors closed, Harry slumped against one of the walls to regain his bearings.

"Harry, what happened in there?" Hermione asked with concern.

"Another vision," he explained simply, still clutching his scar as it throbbed with pain. "I saw Sirius. Voldemort has Sirius in the same place that I saw Nagini attack Mr. Weasley. I have to get to him," he declared as he rose shakily once more. Hermione darted over to him to once again offer her services, but Harry waved her off.

"And where exactly are you planning to go, Harry?" she demanded, seeing that her offer to help had been rejected. "You don't even know where that vision took place."

"No!" Harry replied violently, "it was in the Department of Mysteries. I know that!"

"And how exactly do you plan on getting to London, Harry?" Hermione continued. "The floo system is locked down by the horrid woman, your broomstick has been confiscated. And, on top of all that, you don't even know if this vision was accurate or not! For all you know it could have been a fake!"

Ron had wisely decided to step back from Harry and Hermione, leaving the two to argue on their own.

"I had that other vision about Mr. Weasley, didn't I?" Harry countered. "And that turned out to be right, so why shouldn't this one? I've got to save Sirius, dammit!"

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Hermione paused before replying. "Alright, fine," she conceded. "If you're planning on going there to rescue Sirius, then at least do it properly. You need a plan."

Harry nodded tentatively, his face still red with anger.

"Harry...do you trust me?" Hermione asked meekly. Harry nodded slowly once more. "Then find a way to contact Sirius. Make sure that he's actually in danger. It could turn out that this is a trap, and it wouldn't do to go rushing in without making sure that it's really necessary." She paused again for a moment to think. "The only problem is that owl post is too slow and the floo system is locked down."

"What about the floo connection in Umbridge's office?" Ron suggested, speaking for the first time. "I'm sure it's still open."

"It's risky," Hermione replied quietly, still mulling their options. "But if it's our only option..."

"Wait," Harry said, significantly calmer than before. "I think I have another way. We've got to get up to the tower though."

The trio took off, Harry's mobility much improved due to their rest outside the Great Hall.

A few moments later found the trio bursting into the Gryffindor common room, the portrait of the Fat Lady slamming behind them.

"Wait here," Harry commanded. "I'll be just a moment." He ran up the stairs to the boy's dormitory, only to return a moment later with a glistening object in his hand.

"Sirius gave this to me last Christmas," Harry explained as he approached the other two members of the trio. "I would have never thought to use it, if it weren't for last night." He glanced at Hermione, who did not pick up on the subtlety of his words.

"What is it?" Ron asked.

"Sirius Black," Harry said to the mirror. "It's a two-way communication mirror," he explained as they waited for the mirror to respond. "Sirius said that he and my dad used to use them during detentions to talk to each other. Bloody brilliant if you ask me."

As he finished speaking, Sirius's face appeared on the surface of the mirror.

"What's the matter now, pup? You still want to talk about what happened last night?"

Hermione and Ron crowded in behind Harry as Sirius spoke, hoping to see the mirror in action.

"Sirius," Harry sighed in relief. "Thank Merlin you're alright."

"Why wouldn't I be? Oh, hello there Hermione," Sirius added somewhat nervously, noticing her presence finally.

The three sat down on one of the sofas in the common room, with Harry in the middle, still holding the mirror.

"I had a vision during my History exam. I saw you injured, being held by Voldemort in the Ministry."

"Really?" Sirius asked skeptically. "Sounds like a brilliant way to skive off of an exam to me. But why are you really calling again so soon? Not that I don't want you to call or anything..."

"No, I'm serious!" Harry argued.

"Actually, I'm Sirius," Sirius replied cheekily. But seeing the stony look on Harry's face, he quickly dropped his playful attitude. "Okay then, you saw me being held by snake-breath. But I assure you, I'm not being held prisoner by anyone. Except this sodding house of course."

Hermione shot Harry a significant look, which caused him to drop his head in shame. "Yes, Hermione," he admitted, "you were right."

"Of course she was, cub," Sirius interjected. "She always is. But what was she right about this time?"

"She said that I should check up on you instead of rushing headlong into a situation I knew nothing about. She wanted to make sure I didn't go and lose my head over the whole situation."

"Harry was going to go and save you, consequences be damned," Hermione explained, glancing over at Harry once more.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he mumbled.

She perked up at his apology. "Perfect!" she exclaimed, much happier than before. "Now that that's all settled, I just wanted to ask something. Why didn't you tell me you talked to Sirius last night?"

Harry's eyes widened in fear, and he caught a glimpse of a large Cheshire grin forming on Sirius's face, before he shook his head almost imperceptibly to discourage it.

"Um, I just needed Sirius's advice. You know, O.W.L.s were coming up," he answered lamely. It wasn't technically a lie. Just two separate sentences that had no business being put together. Hermione glanced over at the mirror to see Sirius nodding fervently.

"Uh huh," she replied skeptically. "Am I to believe you asked one of the most notorious pranksters in Hogwarts history, not to mention someone who doesn't always seem to be the most...mature person on Earth, for help on one of the most important exams you would ever take?"

There was silence for a moment as Harry weighed several responses. None of them involved the entire truth.

"I really did need his advice," he responded truthfully. "And then we talked for a while about this and that. You know, blokes talking about bloke things."

"Bloke...things?" she asked, her brow furrowed in thought. "Ron, what do 'bloke things' include?"

Ron threw up his hands in exasperation. "Hey, leave me out of this. I didn't ask to be part of this discussion."

"But you're sitting here," she argued logically. "So you are part of the discussion."

"Then I'm leaving. I'll be upstairs doing...I don't know, playing chess against myself or something. Let me know how it goes, alright mate?" he asked Harry, slowly rising and backing towards the staircase to the boy's dormitory.

Sirius cleared his throat as Ron left. "So, Harry, are you going to tell Dumbledore about your vision? It might be something important, like the one you had with Arthur."

"I'd like to, if he could be bothered to talk to me at all," Harry replied bitterly. "I don't think he's said two words to me all year. That, combined with the fact that I have no idea where he is, makes it quite difficult to talk to him."

"Well, at the very least, you should tell Minerva."

"Oh, didn't you hear?" Hermione asked. "That horrid, toady wench and her cronies attacked Professor McGonagall when she tried to stop them from evicting Hagrid. She's in St. Mungo's."

"What? Is she alright?" Sirius asked.

"I think she'll end up being alright," Hermione said. "From what I understand, she took four stunners to the chest. I haven't heard how she's been doing since then though."

"Just great. Just fantastic," Sirius complained. "I still think you have to tell someone. Who would be next in line to tell about something that involves You-Know-Who?"

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other, Harry giving a disgusted snarl as he realized the answer.

Hermione could instantly tell by the look on his face what his answer was. "Harry, he is the next most senior member of the Order who's here," she rationalized, waiting for the explosion.

"What?" Sirius asked. "Who is it?"

"Snape," Harry groaned.

"Snivellus?" Sirius growled. "He's your only option? Couldn't you tell Filius? He may not be an Order member, but he is still a head of house at Hogwarts."

"But that's just it," Hermione argued. "He isn't a full member of the Order. He isn't aware of what they're doing, and probably wouldn't know the significance of what Harry saw, if there was any. Unfortunately, Harry, Snape is probably our only option for the time being."

"But do I really have to tell anyone?" Harry whined. "I mean, nothing came of the vision, you're safe, so everything's just fine, right?"

"Harry," Sirius began seriously, "I'd be the last person on Earth to suggest you go and visit the Great Big Bat, but I really think you should this time. You never know, he might be able to figure something out based on that little bit you actually saw. Not bloody likely though, he is a giant berk, remember?"

"But he is still a professor," Hermione added. "Come on, Harry. We need to tell him while everything's still fresh in your mind." She stood and tugged at Harry's arm. "Goodbye Sirius," she said as she pulled Harry to his feet.

"Wait, Harry," Sirius began, "put the mirror in your pocket. I want to hear what Snivellus has to say. I just can't seem to get enough of his silky voice," he finished sarcastically.

"Didn't need to hear that, Sirius," Harry moaned in disgust as he placed the small mirror in one the deep pockets in his cousin's oversized trousers.

Having never relinquished her hold on his arm, Hermione pulled Harry toward the portrait-hole, just as Ron descended the stairs once more.

"Where're you two off to?" he asked, taking in the look of horror on Harry's face.

"We're going to see Snape," Hermione replied. "We're going to tell him about Harry's vision and see if he knows anything about it."

At Hermione's explanation, Ron spun on his heels and walked back up the stairs. "Right...well, you can leave me out of that," he muttered as he climbed the stairs once again, leaving the other two to exit the common room as he did so.

"Do I have to go in?" Harry whined for the fourth time since leaving Gryffindor tower. The two friends stood outside of the potion master's office, deep in the dungeons of the castle. They had been standing outside the door for several minutes, Harry refusing to enter. "He'll just criticize and ridicule me like usual," he continued to argue, repeating the same point he had been arguing since they left the common room.

"Are you just going to stand out here all day, Harry?" Hermione asked, crossing her arms over her chest. "You've got to go in there sooner or later. Or at the very least, think of Sirius. He's listening in through his mirror, probably getting bored at our arguing."

"Not bloody likely," Sirius's garbled voice seeped through Harry's trousers. "I'm actually quite entertained right now. You two bicker like an old married couple."

"No, that would be Ron and Hermione," Harry argued.

"No, they argue almost like enemies," Sirius countered. "Insults are thrown in those arguments. You two just seem to be able to bicker almost good-naturedly. It's really quite fun to listen to."

"Anyway," Hermione said, completely discounting Sirius's observations, "we should just go in and get it over with. You do that, then you won't have to stand out here forever dreading it. It will eventually be over," she reasoned.

Harry had to admit that she had a point. It would be easier to get it over with than fear it forever. However, that would not make dealing with Snape any easier.

"Fine," he grumbled. "Let's get it over with."

He pushed off from against the wall he had been leaning against, and strode towards the door, looking more confident than he appeared. Turning the handle, he pushed the door open, revealing the dark, dank office of Severus Snape.

"Potter," the potions master growled, looking up from the stack of parchment on his desk. "I was wondering how long it would take you to come in here. For a moment, I thought you might have forgotten how to use a doorknob. But," he added, seeing Hermione enter as well, "it looks like you brought Granger with you, so I would assume that at least one of you knows how to open a door."

The two newcomers to the office closed the door behind themselves and stepped forward toward the professor's desk.

"Now, I thought the term was ended and I would be free of your tripe, Potter. Will you kindly explain why you've chosen to darken my office with your presence?"

Biting back a retort, Harry glared at his potions professor.

"I've had another vision, sir," he said, the last word laced with disrespect.

Snape dropped his quill on his desk and looked at Harry with a curious scowl, forcing Hermione to wonder how it was possible to scowl curiously.

"And what, pray tell, did this vision entail?" he asked dryly.

"Well, I was in the same place as the vision involving Mr. Weasley. But I kept going this time, through a door into a big room with a lot of

shelves in it. At one point, I stopped and saw Sirius on the floor, injured, being held down by Voldemort-

"Do not speak the Dark Lord's name!" Snape commanded.

"Anyway, I saw Voldemort," Harry continued, purposefully ignoring Snape's orders, "and he told me that I could still save Sirius if I came to where they were, the Department of Mysteries. Then I woke up on the floor of the Great Hall."

Snape stared at Harry blankly as he finished. "That's it?" he asked. "No insight into the Dark Lord's plans? No real new information to speak of?"

"Well, no," Harry admitted. "But I think it might have been a trap. Sirius ended up being just fine and-

"Of course it was a trap you imbecile! The Dark Lord does not do things idly. Everything he does, every move he makes is with a purpose. You," he pointed at Harry as he stood from his seat, "have been given a great gift; a connection to the mind of the greatest dark wizard in recent history. Yet you squander it like some petulant schoolboy! You lack the mental discipline to take full advantage of the gift you possess. If you were truly disciplined, you would have learned occlumency long ago, and would have been able to turn the tables on the Dark Lord. But you let your impulsiveness and petty grudges get in the way."

"My petty grudges?" Harry growled. "I'm not the one who has been condescending since day one. I'm not the one who, for five years, has attacked and ridiculed the son of my rival. A rival who has been dead for fifteen years!"

"Get out," Snape snapped as he picked up his wand from the desk. With a subtle flick, the door slammed open. "Get out of my office. The term is over, Potter. You have no place here."

"Gladly, sir," Harry snarled as he spun and strode out the door, Hermione walking quickly to keep up.

Once they were out in the corridor once more, the door to the office slammed shut. A faint click was heard as the locking mechanism fell into place.

"Did you have to antagonize him like that?" Hermione asked as they made their way out of the maze-like dungeons.

"Me antagonize him?" Harry balked. "He's the one who started it!"

Hermione threw her hands up in her own defense. "Well at the very least you can admit that it could have gone better," she amended.

"Yeah, if he wasn't so immature," Harry replied. He pulled the mirror out of his pocket as they walked. "Did you catch all that, Sirius?"

Sirius's scowl was the first thing Harry and Hermione noticed. "That wanker doesn't know when to let bygones be bygones, does he?" Sirius griped.

"No," Harry responded, "but at least we told somebody. What he does with that information is up to him. But we've done our job for now."

Suddenly, in the background behind Sirius, a horrendous screeching could be heard. "Right," he said, looking behind him, "Harry, if you need me, you know how to get in contact with me. But it looks like Kreacher has riled up the portrait of my mother again. I've got to find a new elf," he muttered as his image vanished.

Harry tucked the mirror back into his pocket as he and Hermione reached Gryffindor tower once more. As the portrait swung open, they realized that they would not be returning to a peaceful, quiet environment. The common room, which had previously been empty, was now full of all of the other fifth-year students, who had previously been taking their exam. The students from other years were still in class.

"Harry, mate!" Seamus shouted in his thick Irish accent from one of the sofas. "Feelin' better? Ron told us what happened." A look of horror crossed Harry's face at this comment. "That must've been a nasty fall, hittin' your head'n all. Must've been the stress from the test?"

Glancing at Hermione and breathing a sigh of relief, Harry spoke. "Yeah, I guess I just stressed out too much. Got lightheaded, and I guess I just blacked out. All I remember is waking up on the floor."

"But at least they'll let you finish your exam, right?" Dean Thomas asked from the other side of the room. "I mean, you couldn't have been finished that quickly, could you? You're not Hermione or anything."

"Hey!" Hermione screeched. "I resent that. You make me sound like a machine that just cranks out answers!"

Dean shrugged in response, irritating Hermione further. Seeing this, Harry decided to intervene.

"Yeah, I wasn't done. But I haven't talked to any of the proctors to find out what I can do. I don't think a student collapsing during one of the exams is too common..."

"You might be surprised, Harry," Ron piped up from the back of the room. "Bill, Charlie, and Percy all came home with stories after their O.W.L.s about some poor fellow who panicked and had some kind of problem. Some of them passed out, some of them vomited. I'm sure there's some kind of procedure in place when something like this happens."

Looking at the clock on the wall, Harry saw that the time was approaching one o'clock in the afternoon.

"You know," he began, "as much as this is interesting to talk about, I'm really knackered. Must've been all the excitement or something. I'm gonna head up and kip out for a while."

He felt the eyes of everyone in the room follow him as he climbed the stairs to the boys' dormitory. However, he had no sooner sat down on the side of his bed to remove his shoes, than he heard the door open and close once more.

"You're not really tired, are you?" Hermione asked softly as she sat down on the side of the bed next to him.

"Not really. I mean, I am exhausted from everything that's happened today, but I don't think I could get any sleep. I just wanted to get away from everyone."

"They weren't trying to pressure you," she reassured.

"I know. But I've never liked attention, you know that."

"I know. That's one of the things I like about you. You've always had the eyes of the world on you, yet you've never wanted it. It makes you real, makes you...just Harry."

Harry snorted at her phrasing, earning him a light slap on the arm. "What?" he asked defensively. "I wasn't under the impression I was 'real.' I always thought I was fake."

"You know what I mean."

"But I just needed to get away from everything," Harry repeated. "This year has been one thing after another, and I haven't had a single minute to breath and be...just Harry."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione offered honestly. "What can I do to help?"

Harry's eyes widened at her offer. "I wasn't asking for your help," he explained quickly. "Not that I don't appreciate the offer or anything. I was just explaining what I was doing."

"That's fine. But I was just trying to support you and do what any friend should do. But I think we're getting too sappy and melodramatic," she pointed out. "What're you going to do now?"

"I don't know. Do you think the examination board will let me retake the exam?"

"It's always a possibility. I'm sure if you explained the circumstances as they really happened, they'd have no choice. But with the school under Umbridge's control, not to mention her influence at the Minsitry, I don't think that'd be a good idea. Maybe they'll see reason though and let you sit for the exam again if you tell them the same story you told everyone downstairs."

"It might as well be worth a try," Harry conceded. "But aside from that, I think I'll just get ready to leave for the year. The Express leaves in a few days."

"Do you know what you're gonna be doing this summer?" Hermione asked curiously.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know specifics. All I know is that Dumbledore isn't around right now, so I don't plan on going back to the Dursley's. I'm sure Sirius will let me stay at Grimmauld Place with him, but the thought of staying in that glorified mortuary isn't all that appealing. Maybe I'll find a way to get out or something."

"But you will write this summer though, right?"

"I don't think I'll have much of a choice, will I?" he asked playfully. "I mean, out of the five years we've known each other, during two of the summers I haven't been able to write anything, so I don't think you'll let me not write this year."

"You can count on it, Harry," she said with mock seriousness.

"So long as you don't keep pushing me to get my homework done, we'll be fine."

She was thoughtful for a moment. "So if I promise not to pester you about homework, will you write more?"

"You know full well I would write you anyway," he answered. "But the homework bit might help," he finished jokingly.

"Then its settled," she acquiesced. "This summer, I'll try not to pester you about your homework, and we'll see how it goes, alright?"

"You know, there's a reason you're my best friend," Harry said, shooting her a sickeningly sweet smile and squeezing her shoulder.

She squirmed away, chuckling. "When you're done joking around, it's about time for lunch. I'm getting hungry, so I'll start heading down there now. You coming?"

"Just give me a few minutes," he replied. "I'll be down soon."

Hermione rose from the bed and made her way toward the door. With her hand on the knob, she turned back to Harry. "Harry?" she

called, causing him to look up at her curiously. But she did not respond immediately, instead pausing for a moment.

"Yeah?" he asked after a moment.

She gave him a small smile. "I'll see you down there," she finished finally before opening the door and leaving the room.

June 12, 2011

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In the end, Harry was given the opportunity to retake the History O.W.L., though not without considerable persuasion on his part. However, despite the extra day of studying time he was given as a result of his situation, there were still a number of questions that he did not have an answer for. Still, his relief was palpable once he finished the exam, as he could finally consider his eventful fifth year at Hogwarts complete.

The morning following his exam was the last day of the term, the day that the Hogwarts Express was due to leave for King's Cross. As Harry sat down for breakfast at the Gryffindor table, his dream of a peaceful, normal summer had never seemed closer.

"Harry, have you seen this?" Hermione asked from behind her copy of the Daily Prophet which had just been delivered along with the rest of the school's owl post.

Harry looked up from his plate to see her push the paper toward him.

"It's on the front," she elaborated as he picked up the paper.

There, stretching across the top of the page, was a single headline. "Aurors Dead in Ministry," it read, in large, bold print. Beneath it lay a stock photograph of the Ministry atrium, followed by the story itself.

"It says that four Aurors were found dead in the Department of Mysteries two days ago," Hermione explained as she saw Harry begin to read."

"Why're they so late in writing about it then?" Ron asked through a mouthful of food. "News that big shouldn't take two days to come out."

"Ron," Hermione began patiently, "I'm sure that there's been some kind of investigation over the past couple of days. That's why it's taken so long. Besides, two days isn't that long to wait for government news anyway."

"Well, at least we know it wasn't just a dream I had then," Harry opined, looking for the positives. "Which means that there's something about the Department of Mysteries that's special to Voldemort." A couple of gasps could be heard from around the trio, causing Harry to roll his eyes. "Why can't they learn that fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself?" he asked rhetorically.

"Still quoting Dumbledore, Harry?" Ron asked, receiving a nod in response. "Where do you think he is, anyway? Do you think anyone's heard anything since he left?"

Harry shrugged. "I haven't heard anything. But I almost couldn't care less. Now I don't have to go back to the bloody Dursleys this summer. Thank Merlin for small favors, eh?"

"But you are coming over to the Burrow this summer too, right?" Ron asked. "Ginny's been wanting to get to know you better and—"

"Honestly, Ron, I'm in the same house that she is. If she wanted to get to know me better, it wouldn't be too hard. Besides, I've spent every summer for the past few years at the Burrow or with her, so she's had plenty of chances. That's not to say I won't come over this summer, but I was thinking of spending at least some of the summer with Sirius. I haven't really had too much time to get to know him. He really is the last family I have left...even though we aren't related that is."

Ron, unable to find anything worthwhile to say, simply nodded his head in understanding.

Harry, for his part, took a long look around the Great Hall, pausing briefly at several faces he recognized. "It's hard to believe we've only got two more years of this place," he commented somewhat

sadly. "But you know what? I've got a feeling that this is going to be the best summer yet."

End of Chapter 2

A/N: The overall plot is starting to seep in here. The main purpose of these first two chapters was to prevent Harry from going to the Ministry. Sirius not being killed is just a pleasant side effect that I get to play with. But then what effects could Harry not going to the Ministry have? You'll have to wait and find out.

I wanted to give you this chapter quickly after posting the first one, in order to help establish this story instead of having it sit with only a short first chapter. The fact that the response to the first chapter was so overwhelmingly positive only helped matters.

I also added the category of "humor" to the story. While this is not a comedy story by any stretch of the imagination, it is going to be fun. And since I don't think that "humor" and "comedy" are the same thing, I felt that that was an appropriate descriptor. So stay tuned for more coming soon!

Chapter 3

You're My Best Friend

June 12, 2011

5:19 PM

The English countryside passed in a blur as Hermione stared out the window of her parent's new Jaguar XJ. Her parents had told her about the purchase of it as they walked out of Kings Cross station in London, her mother describing it as a foolish splurge on the part of her father. But Hermione paid it no attention. Now, as they drove along the M4 toward their home in Swindon, she couldn't help but be lost in thought.

"You've been quiet, Hermione," her father, thirty-eight year old Richard Granger, observed, as he looked in his rear-view mirror. "What's the matter?"

"It's nothing," she replied curtly, almost more forcefully than she wanted.

Her mother, thirty-seven year old Ellen, turned in her seat to look at her daughter. "That's a lie, Hermione, and you know it," she said. "Every year as we drive home, you spend the entire trip telling us about whatever crazy adventures you and those boys of yours got into. This year though, you haven't said more than two words. And you just said those a few seconds ago when you replied to your father. So really, what's wrong?"

Hermione sighed loudly and turned away from the window. She had always been easy for her mother to read. But even then, Hermione had to admit that she was currently being pretty transparent.

"It's Harry," she began.

"It usually is," her mother replied under her breath. "What's he gone and done this time?"

"Nothing, and that's the problem. Mum, he's had such a hard year this year. I told you how he saw Voldemort come back last year. Well, the Ministry wouldn't believe him, so they sent this awful

woman to teach Defense this year. But she spent most of her time goading and even torturing Harry! On top of that, at the end of term, Harry had a vision that his godfather was being tortured and held hostage. Now it looks like it was a trap to get Harry to leave the school and try and rescue Sirius."

"Sirius? Oh, that's right, that's his godfather you told us about a couple of years ago, right?" Hermione nodded. "So what happened? Did he end up trying to go and save him?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, he ended up listening to reason-"

"You mean you, right?" Richard interjected.

"Well, I was able to talk him down a bit. But that's not the point. He gets stuck in the middle of everything, and it's not his fault. I can't help but feel sorry for him. And then he has to go back to those wretched relatives of his, who treat him like dirt and step all over him."

"And why can't he stay with his godfather?" Ellen asked logically.

"Actually, this year he's going to. Ever since the Ministry ousted Professor Dumbledore as Headmaster, he hasn't been around. It's been odd really that he hasn't come back at all, since he's been the one who's forced Harry to go back to the Dursleys every year. With him gone, Harry can go wherever he wants for the summer, so he's going to stay with Sirius this year."

"Then what's bothering you? I know you say he's had a hard year, but it looks like the summer at least is looking up for Harry. I'd think that'd make you feel at least a bit better."

"Oh, mum, you don't understand. I don't feel bad or depressed or any nonsense like that. I was just thinking. I am happy that Harry will be able to finally have a good summer with Sirius. But I was kind of thinking about how I could make it better for him."

"And? What did you come up with?"

Hermione was hesitant to answer. But her mother, who was still turned around in her seat staring at her questioningly, as well as an

intrigued glance from her father in the mirror, convinced her to answer.

"Remember how you sent me a letter about our summer plans last month?" she began. "And remember how you talked about how you had planned a holiday to the States next month?"

"I don't like where this is going..." Richard interjected.

"Well," Hermione continued, undeterred, "I was thinking that we could invite Harry to come along with us. He's never really admitted it, but I don't think he's ever been on a real holiday before, outside of the World Cup last year, and I figured we could help him out there and make his summer more fun and not keep him cooped up in some dark, horrid hole of a house for a few months with nobody to talk to except-"

"Hermione, you're rambling," Ellen interrupted. "But are you sure those are the real reasons you want to invite him to come with us?"

"Of course," Hermione replied, scandalized. "We're going to Florida at the end of July, and I thought that the change of scenery would do him nicely. I just think he needs some time to get his mind off of all of the pressures he places on himself. Also, his birthday is July 31st, which would make it perfect, since we'd be on holiday for it. It would be a nice birthday gift for him."

Ellen turned back around as Richard turned off of the M4 and onto the A419 for the final leg of their journey home. The peaceful scenery along the motorway had turned to a much more urban landscape, as the Grangers entered the outskirts of Swindon.

Richard and Ellen exchanged glances, seeming to communicate silently.

"We'll think about it," Ellen said finally, addressing Hermione. "But we just want to be sure that there isn't something else at play here."

"He's my best friend, mum," Hermione groaned. "I mean, outside of the Yule Ball last year, I don't think he's ever thought of me as a girl. I've always just been one of his mates. So I don't think you'll have a problem there."

"I wasn't talking about him," Ellen responded with a smile. "I was talking about you."

"He's my best friend," Hermione repeated.

Richard had turned off of the A419 at this point, and was beginning to enter the suburb of Covingham, where the Grangers lived.

"If you're sure," Ellen replied skeptically. "Then we'll think about it. It is a big decision on our part. You have no idea how expensive travelling abroad has gotten lately, what with petrol prices shooting up. But we'll think about it."

The car pulled up in front of a large two-story, upper middle-class brick home with a well-manicured lawn. Richard parked in the garage, next to Ellen's four year old BMW M5, and turned off the engine. Hermione, without saying a word to her parents, exited the car and went straight into the house.

"She's sure in a mood," Richard observed as he opened the boot to retrieve Hermione's trunk.

"I don't know what her problem is," Ellen concurred, "but I'll find out later."

June 12, 2011

7:44 PM

Later that night, as the sun set over Covingham, Hermione sat on the edge of her bed sorting through the clothes from her school trunk. Already, her school books had been remanded to the large bookshelf that sat next to her bed, and the pile of clothes that needed washing continued to grow on the floor. As she sorted, the door to her room opened and Ellen walked in and closed it again behind herself.

"Can we talk?" she asked as she sat down on the bed next to Hermione.

"I'm assuming from your tone that you two decided that Harry couldn't come with us?" Hermione assumed without looking up at her mother.

"Now, I never said anything of the kind," Ellen replied forcefully. "But whatever decision we make will be based on what we talk about in here. So don't go taking that attitude with me, young lady."

"Sorry," Hermione apologized. "But I just thought you were coming in here to shoot down my idea. That's not something I'm used to, you know," she added as a joke.

"I know, but it helps develop humility," Ellen retorted. "But anyway, I came up here so that we could talk away from your father. He can be somewhat...intimidating when it comes to matters like this. So I thought we could have some time to talk alone."

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione moaned. "Not this again."

"Yes this again. See, that's exactly what I want to get at. You live in a world that is completely separated from our own. A world that we can't follow you into, with a culture all its own. When you say 'oh, Merlin,' that's exactly my point. We don't know enough about this world of yours, and it feels like we're losing you to it, even if we aren't really. I know you talk to us about what goes on in school and politically in the wizarding world, but it still doesn't feel the same to us. And now that you want to invite a boy to go on vacation with us, it feels like we're losing another part of you."

"So what do you want to know?"

"It's not what I want to know, Hermione. It's just that our relationship isn't what it was five years ago before we sent you to Hogwarts. We would never try to take that part of you away. But we just want to have the same relationship we used to have with you."

Hermione was silent as she looked out her large bay window at the quickly darkening sky, lit only by the glowing lights of civilization and the rising moon.

"So I thought we could start with Harry," Ellen offered.

"He's my best friend," Hermione repeated for the third time that day.

"That may be. But I have a feeling that he means more to you than that."

Hermione didn't reply, and was instead silent once more.

"Is that really so bad to admit?" Ellen prodded.

"There's nothing to admit. Did I want him to ask me to the Yule Ball last year? Yes, I did. Any girl would have been lucky to have him ask her, he is the Boy-Who-Lived after all. But he didn't, so that was that."

"And that's it?"

"What do you want me to say, mum? That I fancy him? Well, I don't. I'll be honest, I do like him differently than I do Ron, but I don't fancy either of them. I just happen to like Harry more."

Ellen sighed. "Hermione, I'm going to be blunt. Based on how much you talk about the boy, I would say that, at least by all outward appearances, you do fancy him, no matter what you say. Now, that may or may not be the case, but Harry obviously means a lot to you, and the fact that you want to invite him on holiday with us only reinforces that. Would you invite Ron to go with us instead?" Hermione looked pensive. "You don't have to answer that. Just think about it. Now, I'm not trying to be accusatory and say that you do actually fancy the bloke. But even without really having met the boy outside of back in the summer before your second year, I can tell that you have a very strong friendship. And that is the perfect foundation for a good relationship. I can tell you that from experience, since your father and I met when we were about your age. We were friends first, good friends at that. But we didn't start a relationship for several years, and it has really seemed to work out perfectly for us. I'm not telling you that that always works, because it doesn't. But I think you should think about what you want out of your relationships, with both boys. Do you want to stay friends like you are with both Harry and Ron, or do you want to try and deepen and strengthen one of those friendships? There is no right or wrong answer to this, only what you feel is best."

With that, Ellen rose from the bed and placed a kiss atop Hermione's head, before making her way to the door.

"Think about it," she concluded as she opened the door and stepped into the hall outside. "Goodnight, Hermione."

Ellen Granger crawled into bed beside her husband later that night, leaving the bedside lamp on as she did so. She sat against the headboard as she fiddled with her earrings, eventually placing them on the table next to her.

"So, how did it go?" Richard asked to her left as he sat up against the headboard.

"Well, I can tell you one thing for certain. She fancies Harry. She's either denying it or just doesn't know it yet."

"Just great," Richard mumbled. "Lord help us when she does know it."

Ellen slapped him on his upper arm for his remark.

"Hey!" he cried softly, more for his injured pride than arm. "I was just telling the truth. With the way she fawns over that boy now, we'll have a dickens of a time once they really do get together."

"So you see it happening too?" Ellen asked, raising a single eyebrow.

"I think it'll happen eventually, if she keeps up the way she has," he admitted, "but I don't have to like it."

"Well I think having him come on holiday would be the perfect chance to get to know him then. What do we really know about Harry Potter aside from what Hermione has told us? Nothing really. I mean, we met him for a few seconds in Diagon Alley a couple of years ago, but that was it."

"And if we take Hermione's word for it, we would think the boy was next in line to be Pope or something. I see where you're going with this. But there's something inherently wrong with our teenage girl asking a boy to come on holiday with her. That's something that you do when you're in a relationship. Or at least, that's what we did when we went to Verbier with your parents after we got together. Then there's the cost factor."

"Oh, don't even go there, Richard," Ellen scolded. "That's not a valid excuse and you know it."

"But you used it with Hermione in the car!" he protested.

"That was because I needed an excuse so that we wouldn't need to give her an answer right away."

"And I need an excuse now!"

"And it doesn't work now," Ellen retorted calmly. "You know full well we could afford to take him on the trip. Yes, travel has gotten expensive, but we can afford it. Think of it this way: if we can afford that bloody car of yours, then we can afford to take an extra person on a week-long trip to Florida."

"So that's that then?" he asked tentatively. "Don't I get any say in this?"

"Oh, stop trying to be the overprotective father, Richard. It doesn't suit you. I remember how you felt when you asked daddy if you could ask me out. Scared out of your wits, you were, all because he had a shotgun hanging over the mantle. Well, you work with drills and knives all day, so how do you think a young man would feel if you started playing the overprotective father? Do you want our daughter to grow up to be an old spinster?"

"Of course not! I just think that she needs to be careful about who she chooses, and she deserves to have a perfect gentleman, not some riffraff off the streets."

"Then you can make your decision when we're on holiday, because Harry is coming with us."

"Fine," Richard grumbled, sliding down under the covers.

"I'll just go tell Hermione quickly," Ellen announced, rising out of the bed once more. "I'll be right back."

Hermione found herself still sitting on her bed, but now against her headboard, reading what appeared to be her well-worn copy of The Standard Book of Spells Grade 5. However, when Ellen opened her door, she saw Hermione close the book quickly, blushing slightly as she placed the book next to her. Ellen immediately knew she wasn't reading her textbook. But she brushed that thought aside.

"Hermione?" she asked as she poked her head into the room. "The answer is yes." With that, she retreated from the room and closed the door softly.

With a huge grin on her face, Hermione jumped off of her bed and rifled through her small oak desk on the other side of the room. A moment later, with paper and a pen in hand, she sat down at the desk and began to write.

Meanwhile, Harry sighed as he dropped his quill on the desk and read the letter he had just written.

Hermione,

I told you I would write to you this summer, and you know I always keep my promises. But I thought I would surprise you by writing first. So what do you think? Are you surprised?

Anyway, I just wanted to see how your summer was going, even though we just talked earlier today. What're you planning on doing this summer? You never told us, instead you were more worried about what I was doing.

Feel free to keep Hedwig as long as you want or to use her if you have any letters you need to send. I think she likes it better when she can keep busy, instead of being trapped in this manky old house.

I hope you write back soon,

Harry

Reading the letter over again to make sure it didn't sound too desperate or needy, Harry rolled it up and tied it to Hedwig's leg.

"Take this to Hermione, girl. I'm sure you know where she lives, so I'm not going to even bother telling you."

He opened the window of his room on the third floor of Grimmauld Place, and let his snowy owl take to the night sky. Harry stared out into the inky blackness as the white speck disappeared into the night, before he closed the window once more and glanced at the old clock on the wall. Noticing that it was nearing eleven at night, he climbed

into his bed and turned out the light before tucking his arm under the pillow and closing his eyes.

June 13, 2011

6:02 AM

Harry awoke early the next morning to a tapping on the window. Rising groggily from his bed, Harry stretched and yawned loudly before walking over to the window and opening it to allow Hedwig back inside.

"You're back soon," he commented tiredly, scratching himself idly.

Hedwig hooted softly before offering her leg, which held a piece of lined muggle paper. Harry untied it and dug around in his trunk to find an owl treat. After he eventually found one and gave it to his owl, Harry sat down on the bed and unrolled the note. He immediately recognized Hermione's neat script and began to read.

Dear Harry,

After we talked the other night in your dormitory about your summer plans, I got to thinking about what else we could do this summer. It seems like we don't get to see each other that much over the summer, except for last year when we were at Number 12, and the year before at the World Cup. I figured it would be easier to get together since you were staying with Sirius this summer, so that got me thinking about what we could do.

Anyway, about a month ago, I received some post at school from my parents, telling me about the holiday they had planned for this summer. My parents are taking two weeks off from their practice at the end of July for holiday, and for the last week in July, we are going over to the States, specifically Florida, in order to visit the beaches there, which are supposed to be nicer than the ones in France (which are the nicest beaches I've been to). But my dad also has this unnatural desire to visit the Disneyworld park there as well, so he thought this would be a good chance.

So, to get to the point, since I know how much you hate reading, I talked with my parents earlier today on the drive home. I asked them if there was room for one more on our trip. They said yes! So, I

wanted to ask you: do you want to come with us on our trip to the States next month? You can think of it as part of your birthday gift if you want, or even as something to celebrate it. I know you don't normally celebrate your birthday, but I really think you should, Harry. You deserve to do something special, and I want to help with that.

So, what do you say? Do you want to come with us?

As I was writing this letter, Hedwig tapped on my window to bring me your letter. Perfect timing, Harry! Now I can send this letter back with Hedwig instead of using the muggle post like I was originally going to do.

And yes, I was surprised by your letter. I never thought you had it in you to write something without being prompted. Just kidding! But what was really funny was how I had already pretty much answered your letter before I got it, when I talked about our planned holiday.

So, Harry, please think about coming with us. I really want you to come and keep me company. Not that my parents are bad company, or that I only want you to come to keep me company. Ugh! You know, it's sometimes really hard to express what you are thinking in writing, even for me! But I hope you understand what I mean.

Anyway, Harry, please think about it, and PLEASE write back. I hope to hear from you soon.

Love,

Hermione

Harry placed the letter on the bed next to him and stared out the window. There was no question he wanted to go on holiday with Hermione and her family. The only problem he faced was how to break it to Sirius. His godfather had been ecstatic to learn that Harry wanted to spend the summer with him for the first time. But to tell him that he wanted to go somewhere else, to spend time with someone else, even for a week, might be difficult.

But even more concerning for Harry was the way Hermione had signed the letter. He kept glancing over at it as it sat open on the bed, his eyes focusing on that single word at the end, "Love." What

did that mean? Was it just there for the sake of formality? Or did it actually mean something? He needed to ask Sirius.

He looked up at the clock on the wall to find that it was just after eight in the morning, so Harry figured that Sirius should be awake at this point.

Harry crept down the stairs to the main floor in an attempt to stay quiet so as not to wake the portrait of Sirius's insane mother, Walburga Black. He glanced over at the curtains covering the painting as he passed, and breathed a sigh of relief when no sound came from behind them.

He snuck into the kitchen and closed the door behind himself. As he did so, he noticed Sirius sitting at the table just off of the kitchen, his head buried in that morning's copy of *The Daily Prophet*, sipping a cup of coffee.

"Morning, Sirius," Harry said, interrupting the older man from his reading.

"Hey, pup," Sirius replied brightly, "you're up early. I would've thought you'd want to sleep in on your first day away from Hogwarts."

Harry shrugged as he sat down in the chair next to Sirius. "Yeah, well that kind of went out the window when Hedwig started tapping on the window."

"So you got some post early in the morning? What ignorant berk was inconsiderate enough to-"

"Hermione," Harry interrupted, effectively quieting Sirius.

"Ah," Sirius responded. "And what did the enchanting Ms. Granger want this morning?"

"Sirius," Harry began as he rolled his eyes, "would you stop with the creepy adjectives when you talk about Hermione? You're old enough to be her father, so she's way too young for you. Doesn't it seem in the least bit creepy when you talk like that?"

Sirius shrugged. "Not really. I'm just doing it for your benefit is all. But I've also learned that that is the way to address any lovely young ladies. It's just proper decorum, if you will."

Harry snorted. "Sirius, you wouldn't recognize proper decorum unless it was blonde and was wearing a top that was three sizes too small," he joked.

"That's not true!" Sirius objected with a broad smile, "I tend to notice if the top is only two sizes too small. I just assume that if a woman is wearing clothes that are several sizes too small, then she must be wearing old clothes since she can't afford new ones. That must mean she needs my help, and I'm all to happy to provide it." Harry rolled his eyes in disgust as he snorted lightly at Sirius's uncouth joke. "Anyway, enough of that. What did she have to say in her letter?"

"Sirius, are you really trying to get me to develop your...tendencies? Or are you just trying to boast?" Harry asked rhetorically. "Anyway, she actually asked me if I wanted to go on holiday with her and her family at the end of July for my birthday."

Sirius finally put the paper down and looked at Harry carefully. "Enough joking around," he announced.

"That's a relief," Harry replied sarcastically.

Sirius ignored Harry's remark. "What do you really want? Do you want to go with her?"

"Well, I don't want you to be left alone here if I do. I know how much you've been looking forward to this summer, and-

"This isn't about me, cub. This is about you. What do you want? I couldn't care less about my own happiness, for lack of a better term. I want you to be happy. Besides, Moony comes and visits every now and then, and there are the Order meetings as well, so I'll have company if you want to go. So what do you want to do?"

"Well, I do kinda want to go..." Harry admitted.

"Great! Then it's settled. Go and write her back and tell her you'd love to go with them. Where are they going anyway?"

"Only you, Sirius, would give approval to go on holiday with someone else without knowing where they are going. But there is something else I wanted to talk about." He pulled out the letter and showed it to Sirius. Sirius took it and began to read it over. A moment later, he finished and set it down on the table atop the morning's paper, and took a sip of his coffee.

"So what's the problem?" he asked finally.

"Look at how she signed the letter!"

Sirius looked again, and looked back up at Harry questioningly. "Hermione?" he asked.

"No," Harry replied as he rolled his eyes. He pointed to the word "Love" on the letter.

"Ah, that," Sirius said significantly. "Well, you know her better than I do, so what do you think it means?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking you. You keep talking about all of your womanizing experience, so that's why I came to you."

"Why, Harry, I'm touched. I never thought all of my selfish pleasure quests would come in handy so many years later. I only wish Moony was here to hear you say that, he'd be eating his own words."

Harry sighed heavily. As much as he enjoyed the back and forth bantering he and Sirius tended to engage in, it sometimes wore thin, especially when it moved away from the topic at hand.

"But back to what you asked. I think that you might be reading too much into this one word. Could it mean exactly what it says, that she loves you? Yes, that is possible. Is it likely? No. Especially at her age, Hermione would not have made the decision that she loves anyone romantically, especially given her personality. Hermione is one who will overanalyze and debate something until the end of time, if possible. So I don't think it's likely that she's in love with you. Now, that doesn't mean that she doesn't care for you, which is what I think she's trying to say here. I think the real question is whether she uses the same closing when she writes letters to Ron."

"What do you want me to do? Write Ron and ask him if Hermione signs her letters to him with 'Love?' That'll go over well."

"No, I'm not suggesting you do anything of the sort. It was more just something to consider. Listen, Harry, I don't want to jump to conclusions or make any kind of judgment about Hermione and her feelings. That's for her to tell you and for you to figure out. I could be of much more use to you to tell you how to win her over, if that's what you want. But deciphering the female mind? That's beyond me. But if you want my opinion, don't jump to conclusions, and don't read too much into these kind of things. If she likes you, she likes you, end of story. But what's important to us is how you feel. What do you want? Are you reading too much into these things because you subconsciously want her to fancy you? Or are you afraid of ruining a good friendship if one of you develops feelings for the other? Something to think about," he finished, as he picked up his paper once more and pushed the letter back over to Harry. "But I think you should go and write her back and tell her you'd love to go on vacation with her. Actually," he added, snapping his fingers, "now that I think about it, you could even invite the Grangers over here for the first week before their trip. I don't know how much Hermione's parents know about magic, but they might like to spend some time in a magical house and see what it's really like in our world. It would also liven the place up a bit to have some extra bodies in here, don't you think? So go on, go write her back and invite them over here while you're at it. It can be our way of paying them back for taking you on the trip."

Harry folded the letter back up and stuck it in the pocket of his sleep pants, before exiting the kitchen and trudging back upstairs to his room. He sat down at his desk and pulled out a fresh piece of parchment and inked up his quill, and began to write.

Hermione,

Hedwig decided it was a brilliant idea to wake me up this morning with your letter. Mind you, I can think of much worse reasons to be woken up. In fact, I think your letter was pretty brilliant. Speaking of which, I'd love to go with you and your parents on your holiday next month. But are you sure it won't be too much of an imposition? I can pay my own way if it would help, since I'm just excited to be able to go.

But Sirius had a great idea when I asked him about going with you. He suggested that I invite you and your parents over here to Grimmauld Place for the first week of your parent's time off. I understand that the last thing that they might want to do is spend time in a gloomy place like this, but it is also a magical house. I don't know how much they know about the magical world, but they might want to see how we live. Just a thought.

So, anyway, yeah, I'd love to go with you on holiday. Just let me know the details and any way I can help out. And let me know what your parents think about coming over here for the first week. It's pretty quiet over here, and any extra company we can get would be nice. If they don't want to though, that's alright too.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Take care,

Harry

He reread his letter one last time before rolling it up and tying it to Hedwigs leg.

"You're really getting a workout for this early in the summer, aren't you girl?" he asked.

Hedwig hooted happily in response before Harry opened his window once more and watched her take to the sky. He then turned and dug through the open trunk that lay on his floor for some fresh clothes, so that he could officially start his day.

End of Chapter 3

A/N: Now, as I promised, I'll try and give you a better hint as to what the next chapter title is. This time, it is a pretty obscure song, which means it warrants listening even more. Like I have said before, these are all Queen songs, so we can start there. This song was written by bassist John Deacon and, based on my experience, is a lesser known song. I will say that time plays a part in its title, which should hopefully be enough to indicate which song it is. But if it's not, I will give you one more hint, in the hopes that somebody will be able to get it: it came out in the 1970's.

Now, let's see if anyone can get it. I will mention though that the title of chapter 4 is not integral to the plot of the chapter, but the title of the song is included in the dialogue at one point and does give you an idea as to the overall theme or plot of the chapter.

Another note: yes, I know that Grimmauld Place is protected by the Fidelius Charm and that Dumbledore is the secret keeper. I will mention that Dumbledore will not be making a direct appearance in this story. In fact, he is completely out of the picture due to his exile. However, that is not to say that he won't have an influence on various aspects of the story to come...but I'll leave it at that. Suffice it to say that those of you who are looking forward to a direct confrontation between Harry and Dumbledore will be disappointed. It's just not in the cards in this story. But that doesn't mean it won't be in one of the planned follow-ups to this story. In this universe, Dumbledore is not evil or mean-spirited, or even extremely manipulative. He is manipulative to be sure, but not to the degree that some stories make him out to be. I'll touch on that very briefly in this story, but for the most part, he doesn't play a major role.

So, I'll see you soon with chapter 4, and I hope you enjoyed chapter 3 and leave a review to let me know! Thank you for reading!

Chapter 4

In Only Seven Days

July 17, 2011

11 AM

Harry Potter glanced at the large grandfather clock on the other side of the sitting room on the first floor of Number 12, Grimmauld Place as he paced around the room. Hermione had written to him to inform him that she and her parents would be arriving via floo at just after eleven in the morning. However, he couldn't help but watch the clock in anticipation, no matter how irrational it seemed.

Sirius, sitting on the sofa nearby, just chuckled at Harry.

"Harry, you know they'll get here eventually. Staring at the clock won't make the time pass any faster. In fact, it'll make it seem slower."

"I know, Sirius," Harry conceded, as he paced the length of the room once more. "But I can't help but wonder if they'll be able to get here or not. We still don't know if they were able to find out the secret from Professor Dumbledore."

"Harry," Sirius began as he shook his head with a smile on his face, "Minerva said that she would get in contact with Albus and get him to write down the secret for the Grangers. She was all too happy to be able to do something useful after being stuck at St. Mungos for so long. So if anyone can do it, she can. Don't worry, we'll find out if she was able to get that to them shortly."

Impatient as he was, Harry had to admit that Sirius had a point. After Hermione had written back saying that her parents would welcome the chance to stay in a magical house, the first concern was how they would get there. Grimmauld Place was still under the protection of the Fidelius Charm, with Albus Dumbledore as the secret keeper. However, due to the fact that he was supposedly unable to be contacted due to his exile from Hogwarts, the biggest issue was how to get the secret to the adult Grangers. Sirius had suggested that they contact Minerva McGonagall, since she always seemed to be the one who was closest to Dumbledore. If anyone could get in

contact with him, she could. However, that had been more than a week before, and still they had not heard anything. Harry could only wait with baited breath as the time seemed to creep by. However, reminiscing about the previous few days and their activities did nothing to make the current time move any faster.

Sirius rolled his eyes as Harry continued to pace. "Harry, sit down," he said forcefully, motioning toward the seat next to him.

But before Harry could sit down, the oversized fireplace next to the large clock flared to life, green flames roaring into existence. A second later, a brown blur launched itself from the hearth at Harry, wrapping him in a tight hug.

"Oh, Harry, it's so good to see you!" Hermione exclaimed, clutching him tightly.

Harry quirked an eyebrow at Sirius, who struggled to suppress a grin, as the floo came to life once more, depositing two more figures, one at a time.

The larger of the two, who Harry assumed was Hermione's father, rose and dusted himself off, before taking in the sight of his daughter firmly attached to the figure of a teenage boy. He scowled lightly as he helped his wife up, but neither Harry nor Hermione saw this.

A moment later, Hermione released Harry, who awkwardly straightened his baggy shirt, not making eye contact with Sirius or the Grangers.

"Harry, these are my parents," Hermione began, introducing them to Harry. "This is my mum, Ellen," she said, as Harry shook her hand gently, "and my dad, Richard."

As Harry grasped the older man's hand firmly, Richard spoke. "You can call me Mr. Granger, Harry," he said authoritatively.

Ellen rolled her eyes. "No you can't," she said, contradicting her husband. You can call me Ellen, and you can call him Richard. It was the name he was given, after all."

"So was Granger," Richard argued under his breath.

"Don't pay him any mind, Harry," Ellen said sweetly. "He's just being a right berk. Thinks it's his job to scare any boy that might be friends with his daughter."

"Well, it is. It's in the father's job description, after all."

"I actually happen to agree with you, sir," Harry interjected somewhat nervously, speaking for the first time since the Grangers arrived. Richard's eyes widened at this. He wasn't expecting Harry to agree with him. "I really don't think it's so wrong for a father to want the best for his daughter. Besides, while I can't speak from experience, I expect its loads of fun too."

"I wouldn't know from experience either, Harry," Richard replied, his mood softening. "But the question is, are you going to let me find out?"

Harry didn't say anything in response, but instead turned crimson and looked away as. Hermione saw this and took action.

"Daddy! Is this how you're going to act during our entire holiday? If you keep this up, I wouldn't blame Harry for running away first chance he got!"

Ellen nodded in assent, as Sirius chuckled in the background.

"Oh honestly Hermione," her father replied, "I was just having a bit of fun with the boy! Testing him to see the strength of his character!" Sirius chuckled again at the somewhat flimsy explanation.

"Oh!" Harry exclaimed, hearing his godfather's laugh. "I completely forgot! This immature child over here," he began, gesturing to Sirius, "is my godfather, Sirius Black. And this grim old place is his humble abode."

Sirius clutched at his chest. "Harry, you wound me," he mocked as he stood to shake the Grangers' hands. "Don't pay attention to Harry here. He likes to throw insults at me like quaffles. It's great fun for the two of us, but might seem a bit mean-spirited when we're around guests."

"Quaffle?" Richard asked, confused.

"Oh! Sorry!" Sirius exclaimed. "I forgot you might not know about quidditch. The quaffle is the ball used in quidditch, the wizarding sport."

"I thought that was the golden snitch?" Ellen asked, eyeing Hermione carefully. "At least that's what Hermione told us when she described the game."

Hermione turned away and blushed, an action that was becoming something of a common occurrence that day.

"Really?" Sirius asked, intrigued as he smiled mischievously. "Well, no matter. The snitch is only one of three different kinds of balls in quidditch. I'll have to explain it to you some time."

Richard and Ellen agreed as they noticed Hermione step away from Harry slightly, putting some distance between the two of them.

"Anyway," Sirius continued loudly, "maybe we should show you around, and teach you some of the finer points of living in a magical house?"

"Oh, absolutely!" Ellen exclaimed. "For years we've pretty much had to take Hermione at her word when it came to the magical world. Outside of when that Professor...what was her name again?"

"McGonagall," Hermione supplied helpfully.

"McGonagall. That's right. Outside of when she came to visit, and when we go to Diagon Alley, we don't really get to see anything magical. Of course we had to accept your invitation to stay here!"

Sirius chuckled. "Well, don't get too excited. I've stayed in the muggle world before, and we aren't too different in the way we live." He led the way out of the sitting room and into the foyer, where the portrait of his mother hung. "Now," he continued very quietly, "the first rule of staying in this house is to be very quiet in the foyer. See this?" he asked, gesturing toward the thick curtain. "This is the portrait of my thankfully deceased mother. The old bat was crazy, and that followed her into death. The portrait's crazy too, and if you wake it up, you will be regretting it for the rest of the day."

"Good to know," Richard replied skeptically as the group moved into the kitchen. "So that's one of those moving pictures Hermione's told us about?"

"Actually," Hermione began, launching into full lecture mode, "it's a portrait. See, wealthy witches and wizards can hire painters to paint portraits of them, and infuse those portraits with their personality and memories. That way, the family can literally still have a piece of the person after they've died. All of the Hogwarts Headmasters have portraits, which is quite useful, especially if the current Headmaster needs advice. However, in some cases, it is not always the best idea to immortalize a person in a portrait, such as with Sirius's mother. No offense, Sirius."

"None taken," he replied, shaking his head. "Remember, I was the one who called her an old bat and said it was a good thing she was dead."

"If you're unlucky enough to wake her up, she will scream at you," Hermione continued, "tossing all sorts of foul profanities at you, calling you unworthy-

"Unworthy mudblood dares defile mistress's home?" a small, nasally voice interrupted her. The group turned around to see Kreacher enter the kitchen. "And she brought her pet muggles with her. Oh, mistress would be so displeased with Kreacher for allowing-

"Kreacher!" Sirius bellowed. "Enough! These are guests in our house, and I will not have you speaking to them like that! Is that understood?"

"Yes, Master Sirius-Brat," Kreacher snarled. "Kreacher will not tell the muggle trash how unworthy they are to be in mistress's house. Kreacher will not tell the filthy mudblood and nasty half-blood that they belong in the gutters with yesterday's garbage. Kreacher will not tell-

"Kreacher! You will not speak to anyone in this house except for me, understood?" The house-elf nodded. "Now, go back to your room until you are summoned." Kreacher scowled and disappeared with a pop, leaving the five humans alone in the kitchen once more.

"Sorry about that," Sirius apologized.

"What was that thing?" Richard asked, taken aback.

"That was Kreacher," Sirius responded as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "He's my house-elf. An unfortunate leftover of the black days of the Black family. I should tell you this right now: my family doesn't have the best history. In this house, there are remnants and reminders of their history supporting dark causes, so I will ask you to be careful. I've gotten rid of most of the dangerous stuff, but I might have missed something. So, when in doubt, ask. Now, I am sorry for Kreacher. He doesn't have the best social skills, especially towards non-purebloods."

"You can say that again," Harry muttered.

"Oh, before I forget, I also need to mention something," Sirius began. "There's going to be a meeting of the Order tonight, so we'll be having a bunch of extra people over. Sorry about that, but it was only something I just found out about earlier this morning."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Harry asked.

"It just slipped my mind. Anyway, knowing Molly, she'll drag the entire brood over here for it, and won't leave for a week. I've never understood that woman. She comes in here, criticizing my parenting skills, then takes over my house. I mean, I love her to death, but she will be the death of me."

"So much for a nice quiet week then, eh?" Harry asked as he cast an unsure glance at the Grangers. "Once the Weasleys get here, you won't be able to hear yourself think, let alone hear anything six inches away. It's like a sodding zoo. Not that it's not fun when they're around, it's just...different."

Despite Harry's and Sirius's downplaying of the situation, Ellen looked on the bright side. "At least we'll be able to get to know more of Hermione's friends," she offered. "I mean, we've already met the Weasleys, but it'll still be nice to get to know them a bit better."

Hermione, though, wasn't so excited. However, she didn't show it, and instead decided to pump Sirius for more information. "So what's the meeting going to be about, then? If it was called so quickly, it must be important."

Sirius shrugged one shoulder. "I don't know. Minerva called it this morning, that's all I know. Maybe it's her way of getting up to speed after she got out of St. Mungos, I don't know. All I know is that it's her call, since Albus doesn't seem to care to be around. Anyway, enough business. Let's show you your rooms."

July 17, 2011

2:27 PM

Richard and Ellen Granger found themselves in a spacious, yet sparsely decorated bedroom on the third floor of Grimmauld Place, unpacking their belongings for their week-long stay. Richard, for his part, was resting on the large bed, sitting up against the headboard as he watched Ellen unpack their clothes into the low, antique dresser on the wall directly across from the bed.

"Well, this certainly isn't the 'Gritz' Carlton to say the least," Richard commented, earning a groan from his wife.

"That was terrible Richard," she complained, referring to his pun. "Besides we're looking at a bachelor that has been cooped up in his family's ancient mansion, probably cleaning it out on his own. I hardly think that house-elf thing has been much help. At least it's livable, so I wouldn't complain too much."

"But did you see those heads on the wall? That's downright barmy I tell you!"

"I'll grant you that," Ellen replied. "But you know what? It's livable. We're only here for a week, so it's not like we have to live here for the rest of our lives. We wanted to know what it would be like to live in a magical home, so here's our chance. It's just not quite what I expected is all."

"You can say that again," Richard grumbled as he looked around the room again. In addition to the bed and dresser, there was a small table next to the bed with an old wind-up clock resting up on it. The only other feature of the room was the single window on the wall opposite the door, but it was blocked by heavy black curtains. The walls themselves were adorned with waist-high black wood paneling, and finished with gray and white wallpaper that seemed to be

yellowing slightly. It was obvious that the house had fallen into disrepair at some point, and that Kreacher had not been much help in maintaining it. Despite this, it was evident that Sirius had attempted to make the house somewhat inhabitable during his house arrest, with the end result of most of the rooms being generally clean, if a bit aged and decrepit.

"It does remind me a bit of that hostel we stayed at that one time," Ellen said. "You know, the one in Gent when we were backpacking across Belgium before Hermione was born? It had the same feel as this."

Richard snorted. "Don't let that Sirius bloke let you hear that. He's liable to take offense at his house being compared to a hostel."

"Not bloody likely," Sirius said from the open door, poking his head inside the room. "I know this house is a right mess. I personally hate it myself, but it is what it is."

"Oh! Sirius!" Ellen shrieked, jumping back slightly in surprise. "We didn't know you were there."

Sirius shrugged. "I wasn't. At least until a second ago. Don't worry, I wasn't crouched next to your door like some crazed stalker or anything, listening in on every word. I was just walking by when I heard you saying that I wouldn't like my house compared to a hostel. Well, to be perfectly honest, a hostel would be a glitzy resort compared to this place."

"That's not true," Ellen responded in an unconvincing tone as she shifted her eyes to Richard for support.

"Erm, yeah," he agreed half-heartedly.

"You two would make terrible actors," Sirius informed them jovially. "I know the place isn't in the best shape, but for right now, I'm forced to stay here. So I'd better make of it what I can."

Richard and Ellen nodded noncommittally, causing Sirius to chuckle once more.

"Anyway, that's not why I came up here," he said. "I was actually wondering if you two wanted to sit in on the Order meeting tonight.

Get a little perspective on what goes on behind the scenes in the wizarding world, if you will."

"Is that really our place?" Ellen asked tentatively.

"It is if I say it is," Sirius replied. "This is my house, after all, and you are my guests. And since this meeting is being held in my house, I get a say on who gets to sit in. I learned that lesson last year after Harry was left out of a meeting."

"We don't want to be an imposition," Richard interjected, seeing the insistent look his wife was giving him.

"And you wouldn't be," Sirius responded. "I just figured I'd invite you so you could have an idea of what's really going on out there."

Ellen glanced at Richard, who shrugged unhelpfully. She rolled her eyes at him before turning back to Sirius to respond. "We'll think about it," she said diplomatically. "That's not to say we're saying no, but that we just want to talk about it. I mean, I know that it's not really a big deal to sit in on a meeting, but let's just say that we don't want to feel out of place."

"I can understand that," Sirius empathized. "But the offer still stands. Let me know what you decide, since it's in only a few hours."

"We will," Ellen told him as he turned and left the room, leaving the adult Grangers alone once more.

When they were alone again, Richard spoke. "So," he began, "what do you think?"

"I told him what I thought," Ellen retorted, "so I would have thought you'd pick up on it too."

"Well, I kinda got what you were saying, but I wasn't sure if you were telling him the whole truth or whether it was just another situation like when you used the money excuse with Hermione."

"Whatever. Now, I personally think it might be interesting to go, but that's just me. I mean, we would be able to find out more about this world, which might let us relate to Hermione better."

"And I happen to agree with you," Richard replied. "I don't know why you didn't just tell him that when he was here."

"Because I wanted to discuss it first," Ellen answered. "But since we're in agreement on it, it was kinda pointless, wasn't it?"

Richard shrugged. "Ya'know, it can be kinda uncanny how well we tend to agree, even without speaking."

"That is true," she agreed. "We wouldn't have survived seventeen years of marriage if we didn't agree."

"So you're giving me full lease to make decisions without consulting you, so long as I think you agree?" Richard joked.

"Absolutely not! I don't know where you got that notion, but that's the last thing I wanted to make you think!" she huffed jokingly.

Richard snapped his fingers in mock disappointment. "Well, there goes my thought of quitting the practice and taking up the hobby of fixing up old lorries full-time," he added tentatively.

Ellen snorted. "Please tell me you weren't trying to test the waters there."

"Eh, it's not really worth talking about now," he replied, his tone of voice vaguely hinting at his sarcasm.

"You're not making me feel any better," Ellen said sarcastically. Richard laughed as she finished unpacking and slid their luggage under the bed. "But that aside, any bets on how Hermione'll spend the meeting? She wrote last year telling us that she wasn't allowed in, but that didn't stop her from listening in with the others. I don't know if she'll do that this time, but I'm willing to wager on where she'll spend the time."

"Don't you mean with 'who?'" Richard grumbled.

"Richard, I've already told you once, the overprotective father routine is outdated and doesn't become you. Give the boy a chance; he's a human being for Pete's sake. He deserves to be treated like one. And that little stunt you pulled downstairs, telling him he couldn't call you by your first name, didn't help matters any."

"I just thought it would be respectful for him to-

"It wasn't respectful of you to say that. Now, it's very possible that Hermione will realize that she fancies the boy, and if she does, it's likely that he'll be in our lives for a long time to come. Is that really the way you want him to think of you? As some domineering, overbearing bully?"

"I think that's a bit harsh..."

"No it isn't. While you may not have been a bully downstairs, I could easily see it turning into that if you keep it up. While it might have been a bit hasty of us to invite him on holiday with us without getting to know him, we now have the perfect opportunity to do so. Don't waste it."

"Yes dear," Richard replied mockingly, causing Ellen to roll her eyes.

July 17, 2011

7:29 PM

Despite the fact that the Order meeting that evening was only supposed to last a short while, Molly Weasley had brought two of her children with her: Ron and Ginny. Just as Sirius had predicted, they had come with the intention of staying for several days, and as a result, were upstairs unpacking in their own rooms. Like with Harry and Hermione, Sirius had provided them with their own rooms this year.

In the meantime, as the appointed time of the Order meeting approached, Harry and Hermione had excused themselves to the sitting room to await word on the outcome of the meeting. They had both assumed that Sirius would inform them as to the contents of the meeting, based simply on his personality and past willingness to divulge sensitive information to the pair, as well as Ron.

"So did you manage to get your summer homework done, Harry?"
Hermione asked seriously.

"Hey! You told me that you wouldn't pester me about that this summer, remember?" he argued, reminding her of her promise in his dormitory before the term had ended.

"I know, I know. But you haven't really said much since we got here, so I had to start a conversation somehow. Seemed like a good place to start."

"Of course, homework's always a good place to start with you, isn't it?" Harry joked tentatively, not wanting to seem like he was ridiculing Hermione too much. The last thing he wanted was to sound like Ron and only associate Hermione with homework.

"Don't even start, Harry," she warned. "I don't want my parents getting that idea about me."

"Huh?" he asked, confused. "You're telling me that your parents don't think school is important to you?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, they know school's important to me, and always has. But that's not all I obsess about at home. Granted, I've always been a bookworm, even before Hogwarts—"

"You're not a 'bookworm,'" Harry corrected. "You just really...enjoy books," he finished lamely.

Hermione chuckled at his poor attempt at relabeling her. "Nice try, Harry. But really, I am a bookworm. I know it, and my parents know it. I'm not saying that like it's a bad thing. But when I'm at home, school and homework aren't the only things I talk about or do. I don't want my parents to think that I obsess about it so much that I'm pestering you about it is all."

"Sounds like your relationship with your parents isn't so cut and dry," Harry observed. "You never really talked about them, so I just assumed that your relationship with them was something like you, me, and Ron."

"You, Ron, and me," she corrected quietly, causing Harry to chuckle. "But no, it's nothing like that. It's just that...our relationship is complicated, to say the least. I don't usually talk about it though."

Harry looked at her curiously. "Why not?"

Hermione took a deep breath before speaking. "It's complicated," she repeated. She seemed to debate with herself for a moment about whether to continue. Finally, after a brief moment, she seemed to decide in favor of doing so. "You know my dad and mum are both dentists, right?" Harry nodded. "They own their own practice in Swindon and everything. In order to really understand, I'll have to start at the beginning."

Harry settled into the sofa and waited for her to continue.

"They met in school when they were about our age, and became friends soon thereafter, both of them belonging to the same group of friends. They remained good friends until they both went to university. Because they lived in a pretty small town, they, along with several of their friends, went to the same university. Now, depending on whether you talk to my mum or my dad, you will get a different answer as to who influenced who into getting a degree in dentistry."

"Who was it?" Harry asked.

Hermione shrugged. "I still haven't been able to get a straight answer out of either of them. Each one keeps telling me that they were the one to influence the other. I don't know the real answer. Anyway, because they were now in the medical program at the university, they seemed to split off from their other friends. As a result, the two grew closer. The rest is kinda self-explanatory. They were married two years later, when my dad was twenty-one and my mum twenty. At this point, my dad had gotten on as a dental assistant to earn some money to get through school, and my mum served as a secretary in the same office that he worked in. However, about a year after getting married, my mum got pregnant and eventually quit her job and school, leaving them with only a single income. My dad continued to work through university, even after I was born. When I was four years old, he finally got his degree and found a full-time position that allowed for much better pay. During this whole time, my mum stayed at home with me, completing the occasional correspondence course to keep working on her degree. But because money was so tight while my dad was in school, she couldn't do too much at one time. Finally, after my dad finished his degree, they had enough money to hire someone to take care of me while my mum went back to school full time. She finished her degree

a few years later, and she and my dad opened their own practice together."

"Not to sound like I'm not interested or anything," Harry began, "but what does that have to do with you?"

Hermione stared off into space, as though contemplating her next move. "Well, you can pretty much see that life for my parents, at least early on, was no bed of roses. They worked all through uni, getting by and living paycheck to paycheck. Now they're successful and well-off, mainly due to their hard work early on. I guess I've always wanted to follow in their footsteps."

"And what's so wrong with that? Hard work and striving to make something of yourself isn't something to be ashamed of, Hermione. It's really just that: something to shoot for."

"Not at the expense of everything else. Contrary to popular belief, being a bookworm and wanting to do well in school are two very different things. When I was younger, my parents always pushed me to do well in school. What parents wouldn't though, really? When they told me their story, I guess it just reinforced to me how hard I should work. But at the same time, I've always got the message from them that school isn't everything. I think daddy asked me once, what good is success if I don't have anyone to share it with? But really, I wanted to please them so much, I guess, that I kinda ignored that. And you can see the end result."

Harry looked at her, perplexed, wondering what was so bad about the end result. From what he could gather, her hard work and bookishness had only been beneficial, serving to save both of their lives on several occasions. He had to tell her that, but before he could, he was interrupted.

"Harry? Hermione?" Sirius poked his head into the sitting room, only to find Harry and Hermione alone. He glanced at Harry knowingly, whose face slowly seemed to be growing red with embarrassment. "I think you're old enough to sit in on the meeting, don't you?" he suggested with a wink. They had not really discussed it, since Harry and Hermione had assumed that they would not be allowed into the meetings again this year.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked tentatively, disappointed at Sirius's entrance, but somewhat excited at his proposal. "I mean, Molly's gonna be there, right? So what'll she say about it?"

"I couldn't care less what she has to say about it. She's not your mother, and since I'm your godfather, I have the final say. As for Hermione, Ellen and Robert have given their permission for her to go too. After all, they're sitting in on the meeting as well."

"Huh?" Hermione asked, dumbfounded. "Why are they there?"

"I just thought it would be right to invite them," Sirius explained with a shrug. "After all, they're guests in my house, as well as adults. And whether they like it or not, their daughter is a part of the magical world, so I thought that they deserved to sit in on the meeting. And after a little while of thinking about it, they agreed."

"Fine," Harry decided, standing up and moving toward the door. "I've always wondered what you guys do in those meetings anyway. From the sounds of it, it sounds like a lot of strategizing, and not much else. I'm curious if there's a big chess board or map sitting on the table with little plastic men who you push around with sticks."

"Only in your perverse fantasies, Harry," Sirius retorted as Hermione stood and joined them as they walked toward the dining room, where the meeting was to be held.

As they entered the room, they saw that Ellen and Robert Granger, Minerva McGonagall and Molly Weasley were already seated. As soon as they entered, Molly's head quickly swiveled and caught sight of them.

"No! They are too young to be here!" she exclaimed, rising from her seat in a huff. She then regained her temper slightly as she addressed Harry and Hermione sweetly. "Now, this is nothing that you two need to concern yourselves with. Let the adults take care of whatever is going on. Go on, go enjoy yourselves. Don't let yourselves get bogged down in this mess."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Molly, they're here because I invited them, and they wanted to come. Surely you don't believe that something involving Voldemort doesn't involve Harry, do you? And anything that involves Harry involves Hermione by default, so there we go."

"They are just children!" she shrieked, losing her temper once more. "Where do you get off thinking that you know what's best for them, Sirius Black? I'm of half a mind to--"

"Molly Weasley, sit down, and shut up!" Sirius roared. "This is my house, and Harry is my godson. His care is my concern, not yours, and I would thank you to kindly stick your nose elsewhere, because it does not belong in my business. Understood?" He paused for a moment to collect his wits. "Now, you two," he said to Harry and Hermione, "I think we should sit down. The meeting should be starting any moment."

Harry and Hermione sat tentatively, with Hermione to Harry's right and Sirius to his left. Ellen and Robert sat next to Hermione, in an unspoken attempt to shield her from Molly's wrath. For her part, the Weasley matron was still seething with rage, but wisely kept it to herself, instead deciding to use her face to display various unhealthy shades of red.

As they sat, a few more members of the Order drifted into the room, taking seats at various points around the table. It seemed, however, that not many members were present, possibly due to the short notice of the meeting. For now, Harry could recognize McGonagall, Snape, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Nymphadora Tonks, Remus, and Alastor Moody.

"I think that's everyone who told me they would be here," McGonagall announced finally, getting everyone's attention, "so let's get started. I'm sure you're all wondering what the reason behind this meeting is. Well, I can tell you that Severus was summoned by You-Know-Who several weeks ago, for some emergency meeting, however little came from that meeting. Now, late last night, Severus was summoned once more. This time, however, he tells me that there is something substantive to report. So, I will turn it over to Severus, to discuss what happened. Severus." She turned the floor over to the Hogwarts potions master, sitting down as she did so.

Snape stood, his black robes swirling around him as he did so. "I will endeavor to keep this simple and entertaining, since Potter has decided to grace us with his presence," he sneered, glaring at Harry. "Loathe as I am to admit it, Potter actually does have a role here tonight, despite the legitimate objections of some," he added,

looking at Molly pointedly. "Just as the last term ended, I was summoned by the Dark Lord, along with a handful of his most loyal followers, to a special gathering. The Dark Lord had previously attempted to draw Potter to the Ministry, in an attempt to retrieve a specific, object of which we are all aware." Harry looked confused by this and opened his mouth to say so. "Potter, you will have to discuss that with the Headmaster," he added, anticipating Harry's question. "But, showing a rare modicum of common sense, Potter did not fall for the ruse, and saved himself, and anyone foolish enough to follow him, a great deal of trouble. He then brought the incident to my attention."

"We know this," Harry growled. "Get to the point."

"As always, Potter, you have no patience. I was simply giving the necessary background for those who are not fully aware of the situation. The Dark Lord was...most displeased by the fact that Potter did not fall for his trap. Now, as most of you are aware from my previous reports, the Dark Lord is neither patient nor is he even-tempered. He also suffers from extreme paranoia. As a result, he tends to overreact and assume the worst possible outcome to a situation. As a result, he read more into the failure of his rouse than he should have."

"What do you mean?" Sirius asked. "Does he think that Harry already knows about the pro-"

"Ahem!" Molly interrupted, clearing her throat loudly.

Snape glared at Sirius before continuing. "No, I am not insinuating that is the case at all. The Dark Lord is of the impression that Potter has developed strong occlumency skills, and is able of withstanding any of his mental attacks. However, having personally attempted to train Potter in the art of occlumency, I can assure you that this is not the case. The Dark Lord now believes that Potter was able to, in some fashion, reverse the attack and probe his mind, thereby learning of the trap."

"That's ridiculous," Harry replied. "I couldn't do that if I tried. I mean, I did see the vision of Mr. Weasley, but I wouldn't even begin to know where to start when it came to doing that again."

"Trust me Potter, I know this very well. Your lack of skill in occlumency was most entertaining, despite the fact that it wasted some of my valuable time. That aside, I will once again reiterate the fact that the Dark Lord is extremely paranoid. He plots, plans, and schemes for every eventuality, and analyzes every outcome. If he even catches a hint that his power may be in danger, he will take action. And that is what he has done."

"So what does this have to do with us then?" Harry asked, irritated at the small jabs that Snape had been taking at him.

"Fearing that the connection between himself and Potter is a potential liability, the Dark Lord has taken steps to protect his assets. While normally this would be standard behavior for the Dark Lord, I have found one action in particular quite intriguing. The Dark Lord has directed Lucius Malfoy to protect what he refers to as his most treasured possession. While I am not aware of what this object is, I am aware that it was previously under the protection of Bellatrix Lestrange. However, the Dark Lord felt that the protections on it were not sufficient enough to protect the object from Potter's roving mind, and has given it to Malfoy to protect."

"So what?" Harry challenged. "So Voldemort," he paused for the inevitable gasp from Molly and glare from Snape, "chose to protect his favorite toy. So what? Why's that so important?"

Snape leaned over the table, spreading his arms wide to support himself as he made eye contact with Harry. "Potter, your shortsightedness never ceases to astound me. Any object that is highly favored by the Dark Lord must have dire implications for the rest of the wizarding world. Undoubtedly, this is some kind of dark object that we know nothing about. But if the Dark Lord is willing to take such extreme steps to protect it, it is likely that it is key to his power or plans in some way."

"What do you mean, 'extreme steps?'" Hermione asked. "All you said was that he had taken it away from Bellatrix and given it to Malfoy. That doesn't sound too extreme to me."

Snape eyed Hermione's parents carefully before responding. "It is extreme, Miss Granger," he began with forced patience, "because of the circumstances. Lestrange has long been tasked with protecting the most treasured belongings of the Dark Lord, and she has

chosen to do so by utilizing her Gringotts vault. The fact that the Dark Lord no longer views Gringotts as secure is troubling. However, that is not the most interesting aspect of this situation. As you are no doubt aware, Mr. Malfoy is extremely wealthy, and his wealth comes from several sources. However, the primary source of his wealth is the muggle gaming industry. Specifically, the casino industry."

"That makes no sense, though," Hermione objected. "Why would a devoted follower of Voldemort get involved in the muggle gaming industry? That seems to go against everything the Death Eaters believe in!"

Snape nodded thoughtfully, honestly appreciating Hermione's statement. "While normally I would agree with you, Miss Granger, the situation is not that simple. You are correct in your assumption that most Death Eaters would normally not get involved in the muggle world, Mr. Malfoy is not one of them. True, he despises muggles, and actively works toward their demise, but at the same time, he is also a very intelligent man. He understands that the muggle economy is vast and waiting to be tapped, and he also believes that he can take advantage of weak-minded muggles by tempting them with games of chance. In this way, he is able to profit from the muggle world, while at the same time working to undermine it by sowing the seeds of addiction. He is then able to utilize these profits to fund the activities of the Dark Lord."

Hermione had to admit that he had a point. While it seemed to go against everything the Death Eaters stood for, once she thought about it, owning a muggle casino was actually just an extension of Death Eater ideals.

"So Voldemort gave this...item to Malfoy to put in his casino?" Remus asked for clarification.

Snape nodded curtly. "Indeed. At least, that is the insinuation that Mr. Malfoy made. However, that also puts us at a distinct disadvantage if we are intending to learn what the object is."

"And why's that?" Sirius asked.

"Because the property that Mr. Malfoy owns is in the United States. More specifically, in the muggle gaming destination of Las Vegas."

Sirius snorted. "What a perfect place for Malfoy to go. He's the scum of the Earth, so of course he'd choose Sin City."

"Choose your next witticism more carefully next time, mutt," Snape growled. "This is a serious situation."

"Is there any way you can find out what the object is?" McGonagall asked, speaking for the first time.

Snape shook his head. "As far as the Dark Lord seems to be concerned, the matter is closed. After the meeting last night, when Mr. Malfoy reported that the object is now in place in Las Vegas and that he would be traveling there to oversee the security measures, I doubt very much that the Dark Lord will discuss the matter further."

"Oh, I wish Albus was here," Molly moaned. "Then we could ask him what he thinks we should do. I mean, it would be easy enough to just forget about the whole matter and be done with it. But the Order exists to deal with situations just like this. We can't survive in a head-on battle against You-Know-Who and his followers, but we can work behind the scenes to stop him. That's what we're here for."

"Is there any way anybody can contact him?" Hermione asked.

McGonagall shook her head. "Unfortunately, every owl I try to send to him comes back undelivered. Every way I can think of to contact him has failed so far."

"Then how did you get the secret to the Grangers about Headquarters?" Harry asked.

"I didn't," McGonagall admitted. "I tried to send Albus a letter, asking him to write down the address for them, but it, like all of the others, came back undelivered. That usually means that either the person does not want to receive any post, or they are too far away for the owl to reach."

"Then how did you get the secret?" Harry asked the Grangers.

"Some large bird appeared in a flame in our kitchen this morning just before we were supposed to leave," Ellen answered. "It gave us a piece of paper-

"Parchment," Hermione corrected.

"Parchment, and disappeared in a flame."

"That would be Fawkes," Harry explained. "So we know that the Headmaster was behind that, but it doesn't explain how he knew to send the address in the first place."

"Is anything Albus does explainable?" Sirius asked sarcastically. "I'm sure he knows what's going on, and has just chosen to stay out of communication on purpose. The only question is, why?"

"Unfortunately, that is not the issue right now," McGonagall commented. "With Albus unreachable, we must choose whether we will act, and how we will do so. So, I'm open to suggestions from everybody."

"If You-Know-Who thinks this object is important, then it obviously is," Moody commented from his vantage point leaning against the wall across from Harry. "We can't afford to let him keep control over it."

"Hold on," Shacklebolt argued. "We don't even know what this thing is. For all we know it could be his prized stuffed hippogriff from when he was a kid. I don't think we can assume that we have to steal something without knowing what it is."

Murmurs erupted from around the room as various suggestions were bandied about. Ellen, for her part, appeared contemplative as the others discussed the predicament.

"Whatcha thinking about?" Richard whispered in her ear, leaning over subtly.

"Just thinking," she replied cryptically. "About a way we could help."

Richard quirked a single eyebrow in curiosity at her statement. "What do you mean, help?" he asked. "Why is that our responsibility?"

"Like it or not, we're involved in this to some degree," she argued. "I mean, we aren't part of the magical world, but our daughter is. So to some degree, this does affect us. Besides, we could learn more

about this world that's claimed Hermione." Richard appeared pensive. "Do you trust me?" Ellen asked.

"Well, yeah," he responded, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "But-

"How do you like the sound of a trip to Vegas?" Ellen whispered, shutting him up. He didn't have time to respond before she raised her voice to address the rest of the group. "Then why don't we find out what it is?" she suggested, speaking before the entire congregation for the first time. All eyes in the room turned to her and her idea. "I mean, I don't know about you, but the sound of a trip to Las Vegas doesn't sound too bad to me."

Richard looked around the table frantically before leaning over to his wife and whispering in her ear. "What do you think you're doing?" he whispered angrily through clenched teeth.

"I just had an idea," she whispered back, before leaning away from him and raising her voice once more. "See, Harry, Hermione, Richard, and I were planning on taking a trip to the States in a week anyway. It wouldn't be that hard to change our plane tickets to go to Las Vegas instead of Florida. Granted, it might be a bit more expensive, especially on such short notice, but it must be doable."

Snape took a deep breath before making eye contact with Ellen. "Mrs. Granger," he began slowly, "forgive me if this sounds offensive, but how exactly can you help us in this situation? You lack any magic and would not be able to contend with Mr. Malfoy directly due to that...handicap."

Richard gritted his teeth as Snape insulted his wife, understanding why Hermione complained about this professor. "Then that is exactly why we are the perfect choices for this," he argued, joining Ellen's side. "Forgive me if this sounds offensive," he said, repeating Snape's words for effect, "but any one of you here would stick out like a sore thumb in Las Vegas if you went on your own. You said it yourself that this is a muggle casino that Mr. Malfoy operates. And any good spy knows that the best reconnaissance is performed by somebody who blends in. Ergo, we're perfect." He swallowed quickly before continuing. "However," he added, "don't think I don't see the benefit of taking someone magical with us. But I'm not really

comfortable going with just a teenage witch and wizard to fill that role. No offense, Harry, Hermione."

Harry nodded the comment off, wondering why Richard was doing this.

"Richard, Ellen," Sirius began, "you're really willing to sacrifice your own holiday in order to go on some little survey mission for us?"

"Well, we wouldn't be going alone," Richard retorted. "We'd have to take some of you with us. But it wouldn't really be much of a sacrifice for us. We'd still be able to go to a prime tourist location and get some sun." He added this last part in an attempt to further justify his decision to the others, in addition to his wife.

McGonagall eyed Richard carefully, before shifting her gaze to Ellen, in an attempt to read her opinion on the matter, who nodded in agreement. "Well then," she began, "if you see it as no trouble, and if you can work out the necessary arrangements, then I see no problem with this plan. However, I want to see a list of who is going and make sure that wise choices are made. Otherwise, this plan may be in serious jeopardy. For now though, unless a better idea is put forth, we go forward with Mr. and Mrs. Grangers' plan. Severus," she added, "did you have anything else you wanted to mention?"

"I do want to mention that, despite the fact that the Dark Lord fears Potter's occlumency skills, that does not preclude the possibility that he will attempt further incursions into the boy's mind. Sending him away on holiday would not make matters more secure. In fact, the various...frivolities in Las Vegas may lead to further mental weakness."

"Then what do you suggest, Severus?" Moody asked. "You training him in occlumency further?"

Snape sighed deeply. "If he promises to behave himself, I will allow Potter one last chance to learn occlumency from me, in order to honor the Headmaster's wishes. However, if he were to betray my trust again..." he trailed off as Hermione glanced at Harry for clarification. He provided none.

"I won't allow it," McGonagall replied forcefully. "From what I know of your previous lessons, they were far from helpful, to say the least.

But to be more accurate, they were bordering on abusive. There is no way I would subject Mr. Potter to that again."

"But the Headmaster-

"Is not here," McGonagall interrupted. "But I am, and I have decided that Mr. Potter will not be attending any further occlumency lessons with you."

Snape smirked in rueful satisfaction, but did not sit back down, nor did he attempt to even feign disappointment at McGonagall's decision.

"Then if you have nothing further to add Severus, I do believe that this meeting is adjourned," McGonagall announced, "as that was the only order of business for the night. Thank you for coming, everyone."

As Harry and Hermione stepped out of the dining room at Grimmauld Place, they were immediately bombarded with questions from a pair of red-headed siblings.

"So what did they talk about?" Ron asked earnestly. "The twins weren't here, and I didn't bring an Extendable Ear of my own, so we couldn't listen in. What did they talk about?"

"Ron," Hermione began, "I don't really think we need to talk about it right this second." She watched as her parents walked by, headed toward the sitting room on the other side of the first floor.

"Harry! You'll tell us, right?" Ginny pestered, trying to pump Harry for information.

But he shook his head in the negative. "Maybe in a little bit, guys. But right now, Hermione and I need to go and talk to her parents. We'll catch up with you in a bit, alright? You are staying here for a few days aren't you?"

Ron nodded glumly. "Yeah, mum always makes us stay here for a few days after each meeting. Says it lets us get out of the Burrow for a few days, lets us get a change of scenery. Personally, I don't like the scenery here myself. Not that I don't want to spend time with you

mate. Or you, Hermione," he added hastily. "But this house just gives me the creeps."

"I know what you mean, mate," Harry agreed as he slapped Ron on the back. "Anyway, we need to go talk to Mr. and Mrs. Granger. See you around later, alright?"

Harry led Hermione away from the youngest Weasleys and across the first floor and into the sitting room. As they approached, they heard voices engaged in a lively discussion.

"Well that was certainly a big decision for you to make on your own," Richard said, his voice tinged with spite. "Especially after what you said about partnership and teamwork earlier."

"Well, I thought that it was a good idea at the time. Yes I know it is a big decision, but I thought I was doing something important," Ellen argued. "Not to mention the fact that I let you know ahead of time. You didn't seem too opposed to the idea. I mean, I know we were planning on going to Florida, and I probably could have spent a bit more time thinking about it, but what's done is done. We can still back out, but then we'd have to explain that."

"Not that I want to do that, but don't you think that speaking up like that was kinda...hasty? We don't owe those people anything, yet we just volunteered to travel thousands of miles for them on some survey mission. Not to mention the fact that our holiday was supposed to be in only seven days."

"Alright, alright, I know you think I was irresponsible."

"That's not what I'm saying," he countered. "I'm not saying it was irresponsible. I'm saying it was unexpected. You know full well I've fancied a trip to Vegas for a while, so I'm not complaining about that. I just don't know why we're going for them. Really, it all comes back to that Harry fellow, since he is at the source of it all. It may not be his fault, and Lord knows I don't want to blame him for anything, but he is involved. It just seems like a lot to do for someone we hardly even know."

Harry and Hermione poked their head around the corner to get a better view, just in time to see Ellen nodding her head in agreement.

"All the more reason to do this," she argued. "What better way to get to know someone than in their own element."

"Vegas is his element?" Richard balked.

"I meant the magical world. Granted, we'll all be out of our comfort zone a bit, but there will be magic involved to some degree. Maybe then we'll be able to see him the way Hermione sees him."

"I'll admit that your idea has some credibility," Richard conceded. "But it does seem awfully thin. And I can't get over the fact that we walked out of that meeting having tried to solve all of their problems. We were supposed to be at that meeting just as observers more than anything else."

"Right, but I guess we're a bit more than observers now, aren't we?" she joked. "That aside, we can finally get involved in Hermione's life with this. We both know how disconnected we've been from her the past few years. Maybe this is what we need to finally get to really know her again."

"Another good point," Richard replied. "I guess I can see the logic behind it all. Not that I'm disagreeing, remember. It was just a bit of a rash decision, that's all."

"Time isn't on our side, remember? We only have a week before we're supposed to leave. But if we're gonna do this, you better make the most of it. This trip gives you the chance to make a good impression on Harry, not to mention get to know him better. Hermione could have just as easily invited him to spend some time with us at home, but the fact that she wanted him to come on holiday with us shows how much she really cares for him."

But before Richard could respond, Sirius entered from the other entrance into the sitting room. Harry and Hermione took this opportunity to enter as well, hoping to remain nonchalant and act as though they had not been eavesdropping.

"Are you really sure about this, Mr. Granger?" Harry asked tentatively as he sat down on one of the two sofas.

"Harry, call him Richard," Ellen suggested.

"Sorry...Richard," Harry amended.

"It's alright, Harry," Richard said confidently, his mood improved from a moment earlier. "And yes, I am sure about this. To be perfectly honest, I've been wanting to go to Las Vegas for years now, since I do like my share of gaming. This is just the perfect opportunity to finally do it."

"Daddy does like his card games," Hermione admitted. "He's played bridge for years."

Richard snorted. "Bridge," he repeated derisively. "I don't have anything against it. In fact, I really do enjoy playing it. But sometimes I almost wish it would stick its hand down the front of my trousers and have a little rummage."

"Daddy!" Hermione exclaimed, horrified at her father's comment.

"What?" he replied innocently. "It's true! Bridge can get boring. I've always wanted to play some other card games at a major casino, that's why I've always wanted to go to Vegas. This is the perfect chance, and I had to jump at it."

"So then how are we going to do this?" Harry asked.

"Well," Sirius began, "since you are doing this for the Order, I want to help. I'll be honest, my family is quite well off, and has historically used that money for some less savory purposes. I'd like to help out there."

"Well then, Sirius, since you're going to be funding part of the trip, you might as well come along then, right?" Richard suggested.

"If you insist," Sirius replied with a grin.

"What about the fact that you're still wanted?" Harry objected. "If the Ministry catches you, they'll have you kissed for sure!"

"Eh, I'm only wanted in Europe," Sirius replied nonchalantly. "Moony took the liberty of researching it for me, in the event that I wanted to run off to some tropical paradise and surround myself with scantily-clad women. So long as I get out of Britain, I'll be fine. And even that shouldn't be too difficult. The Ministry is full of quacks these days,

and they're all completely useless. It should be a cakewalk to slip through their net. Besides, I've always wanted to give ol' Lucius a good stomping."

"While that is a pleasant thought to have, here's what I'm thinking," Harry interjected. "At the very least, I expect Malfoy to be well connected, even in America. So I have no doubt he'll have any form of magical transportation monitored. That rules out international portkeys and the international floo system."

"I thought we were just going to fly there like before," Ellen said.

"We can...and now that I think about it, we probably should," Harry concluded. "The only question is how many people to take."

"Well, I don't think we should take too many," Ellen opined. "The whole point of this entire thing is to stay under the radar. Bringing a small army with us kind of defeats the entire purpose."

"True," Sirius commented. "But I'm not gonna decide on numbers, since money isn't an issue. We just need to decide who's going and go with that. We can't go into this with a predetermined number already in our heads."

"Sure," Harry agreed as he shrugged. The others nodded slightly in agreement as well. "But the question is, who do we take?"

"Well, since it was the Grangers trip to begin with," Sirius began, "I think that they should be the ones to decide. After all, they'll be the ones who have to live with the decision."

"Oh, such a positive outlook you have on everything, Sirius," Richard responded dryly.

"I think that Harry and Hermione should decide, personally," Ellen suggested. "After all, they were the ones who were going to go on holiday with us to begin with, and they know all of these people anyway. I think they'd be the best people to decide on who to take and who to leave behind."

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other and nodded.

"Sure," Hermione agreed for the both of them. "I'll draw up some lists and charts and we'll go over them in the morning."

"Leave it to Hermione to draw up lists and charts," Harry muttered.

"She gets that from her father," Ellen explained. "Her good looks she gets from me, but the brains came from the other side. Although you might not always be able to tell..."

"Anyway..." Harry began loudly, interrupting Ellen's commentary. "I think Hermione's right, and we'll take a look in the morning, since it's too late now."

With that, the group disbanded and retreated to their respective rooms upstairs, eager to see what decisions the next day would bring.

End of Chapter 4

Author's Note: Well, because I am now putting these notes at the end of the chapter, I am able to write more and talk about more. You are not, however, required to read them. I hope that at least a few of you find these interesting or informative in some way, but if not, please let me know. Now, there are a few things I want to talk about in this note, so let's get started.

The first is that I want to congratulate the following reviewers for correctly guessing the name of this chapter in advance: acam, mckisab, and anonymous reviewer GodricG89. They all correctly guessed that the name of this chapter would be "In Only Seven Days," written by John Deacon and released on the Jazz album in 1978. Now, to give you a hint for the next chapter, you must bear in mind the fact that the next chapter will be mainly dedicated to Harry and Hermione sifting through their friends to find the people who would be best to join them. That's as much of a hint as I can give you, with the exception of the fact that I do not repeat chapter names.

I also want to take a few minutes to talk about the character of Dumbledore. I have read all of the reviews for this story, and I thank you all for each one. A few of them mention the fact that Dumbledore seems to be somewhat hands-off and invisible in this story. Trust me, that is completely purposeful. I do believe that the

character of Dumbledore is a manipulative one, but that we do not always see his manipulations immediately. I also must stress that there will be, for lack of a better term, plot holes in this story, which are purposeful. Some minor aspects of this story are meant to set up plot threads in future stories I have planned. Do note that all of the major story threads will be tied up in this story, so do not worry about that. I am simply trying to sow the seeds for the other parts of this intended story. The Dumbledore story plays into that somewhat. When I sat down to write this story, one of the questions that popped into my mind was what he was doing during his entire exile from Hogwarts. That is a question I intend to answer, partly with this story, and partly with some others. In addition, some reviews have pointed out that Dumbledore would never allow Harry to live in an unsupervised environment or go somewhere unsafe without being constantly monitored. This begs the question, however, of whether Dumbledore would allow Harry to gallivant around the globe if he was being supervised. So, to sum up this section, I want to pose one question to all of you, one that relates to the character of Dumbledore: what if he decided to train Harry or give him some unique experiences while, at the same time, being monitored and watched over by Dumbledore personally? Now, I'm not saying that this is necessarily completely the case, but it is just something to consider.

Also, to answer a few other reviews, I do want to reiterate the fact that yes, Harry is socially awkward. That is why he is so confused about everything Hermione does, including signing her letter "love." Another point to discuss is the concept of the Grangers taking Harry on holiday with them somewhat...hastily. I completely respect this point of view, and I would normally agree with it if it were my own daughter and her friend we were talking about. However, in the case of this story, it just didn't seem to fit for them to visit at Hermione's house for a week. That is partially due to the fact that the Grangers had already scheduled this trip, during the time when Harry's birthday would normally be. The fact that his birthday falls during the trip played a part in the decision to allow him to come, and will play a part at the end of the story. In addition, the main reason why Harry is going on holiday with the Grangers is because that is central to the entire story. I had to send him out of the country in order for the story to even take place. So there is that to consider. Regarding the change in destination that occurred in this chapter, that is central to the entire story, since the story takes place in Las Vegas. I'm sure a good number of you can guess the general premise of the story by

now, but that's alright. It's also alright that most of you may be able to guess what the "object" is, especially if you have knowledge of canon. But the fun in a story isn't in the destination, it's in the journey from point A to point B, and I am trying my best to make that as fun as possible.

I also want to ask about author's notes. I've noticed through reviews that many of you are actually reading these, which is great. But I want to know what is too much and where to stop. Are you actually finding these interesting? Or are you reading them out of pity? Let me know if they should be shortened, eliminated, or changed at all.

Anyway, I've rambled on long enough. I truly hope you enjoyed chapter 4 of this story, and I ask you to leave me a review telling me how much you liked it. I also hope you stick around to follow the rest of this story, since we're just about to start getting into the meat of it all.

Chapter 5

Friends Will Be Friends

July 18, 2011

10:21 AM

The next morning found Harry and Hermione in his room on the third floor, with the door open, poring over the list Hermione had compiled for their trip. This year, as opposed to the summer before, Sirius had allowed Harry and Hermione to have their own rooms, instead of sharing with Ron and Ginny, respectively. Apparently Sirius had used his time in solitude at Grimmauld Place to clean more rooms, thereby allowing for everyone to have their own.

Despite the early hour at which they had retired, Harry had not been graced with restful sleep. Instead, his mind kept wandering to the conversation he and Hermione had overheard between Richard and Ellen Granger the night before, especially the portions where either Granger had mentioned how much Hermione cared for him, and how keen they were to get to know him better. It was almost as if they knew something that he didn't. And that was the problem for Harry. Ever since the end of term, his mind had been drifting to Hermione more and more, almost as if it were searching for some hidden meaning in everything she said and did. It was enough to drive a bloke barmy.

That led Harry to his current situation, sitting on his bed with Hermione, with various pieces of parchment scattered before them. Most of the parchment was blank, but that didn't stop Hermione from looking at them occasionally, almost for reference. He watched as Hermione tucked a strand of her still-wet hair behind her ear as she gnawed on the end of a quill in concentration.

What does that really mean? Harry thought. That she cares about me? It could be innocent enough, of course, just like the kiss...and the note...and the hug yesterday morning...and the fact that her parents seem intent on getting to know me. There must be a pattern here. There must be!

But, as Harry's mind drifted toward an inevitable conclusion, he was reminded of Sirius's words. No! I have to be realistic about this!

Harry reminded himself. I must be reading too much into these things. Is it just because I want her to fancy- No! That can't be right. It's all just a coincidence...right?

Harry glanced at Hermione again just as she looked up and smiled at him brightly. No words were exchanged, but the two made eye contact briefly before Hermione returned to her parchment and quickly scribbled something.

That's it, Harry concluded, I have to find out for sure. But I can't be direct about it, since she obviously isn't being direct about it...if there's anything to be direct about at all. That's it! The holiday! That's the perfect chance for me to spend some extra time with her, outside of her element. If we're somewhere that we're both new to, then she won't have the home-field advantage, he rationalized, then I'll be able to get a better idea about things!

Satisfied with his plan, Harry turned his attention back to Hermione, and resolved to act as normal as possible. At least, as normal as he could. That, of course, meant that it would be a constant struggle to maintain the status-quo, due to the fact that he would constantly be thinking about it. But he paid it no attention as he searched his mind for a good conversation starter.

"Sorry if you were looking forward to going to Florida," Harry offered lamely. However, it was the fourth time that he had offered such an apology since Richard and Ellen had decided to change their holiday destination.

"Oh, Harry, how many times do I have to tell you? Stop apologizing. You didn't do anything wrong, so why are you apologizing?"

Harry shrugged. "Just something I'm used to, I guess."

"Then get out of that habit, will you? Not everything is your fault, and it just looks pathetic if you apologize just to make small talk."

"Sorry," he replied sheepishly.

"No you aren't. That's what I'm talking about. Don't be sorry for being sorry for something you shouldn't be sorry for."

"How many times did you just use the word 'sorry' in one sentence?"

"That's not important," she responded with a grin. "But I think we're getting off track. If we're only going to bring a few more people, we'd better choose them wisely."

"Well, I almost think that the number three would be a good one," he explained sheepishly, having made the suggestion earlier that taking only a few people would be best. "We can change it if you want."

"That's alright," she offered. "I was just poking fun, that's all."

"Anyway, if we're gonna bring Sirius, we might as well bring Remus along too."

"Why?" Hermione asked. "Not that I don't agree with you, but I'm just curious how you came to that conclusion. Bringing Remus along just because Sirius is coming doesn't seem like very sound logic."

"Um, well, Remus is pretty sharp, so that'll come in handy. Plus, I'm pretty sure he spent some time in the muggle world after Sirius went to Azkaban. So he'll be helpful there. And-

Hermione put her hand up to silence him. "I get it, Harry. I just wanted you to justify your answer."

"Why does it always seem like we're in school?" he asked sarcastically. "What you just said sounds just like an essay assignment or something where we have to 'justify' our thoughts."

Hermione turned red, embarrassed. "Sorry," she said sheepishly. "I just...erm....I don't want it to sound like I'm only concerned with school...but..."

"Hermione," Harry said, stopping her rambling, "I was just kidding. I know that you don't have a giant homework planner for a brain. I was just having some fun with you."

She quirked an eyebrow at his last comment.

"But it does look like you have a dirty mind," Harry concluded, smiling broadly. "I mean, you took that comment completely wrong."

"No," she argued, "I was just trying to have some fun with you and embarrass you. Apparently it didn't work all that well."

"Not really, Hermione. I'll just tell you now, for future reference, you can't out-dirty my mind. I'm a teenage bloke, remember? Our minds are made of pure smut."

"Oh really?" she asked sweetly. "Then how about Professor McGonagall?"

"Huh?" he croaked, his eyes bulging suddenly as his mind processed her statement, immediately jumping to the wrong conclusion. "What about her?"

"How about we ask her if she wants to go with us? What did you think I meant?" she asked innocently, a playful grin plastered on her face.

"I...er...nevermind. But why her?"

Hermione shrugged. "Well, I don't know for certain, but I don't think she'll be very welcome back in the castle just yet, especially after what happened at the end of term." She was, of course, referencing the incident involving Hagrid and Umbridge that resulted in McGonagall's lengthy stay in St. Mungos earlier in the summer. "Also, she has that whole wisdom thing going for her, since she is the de facto head of the Order right now with Professor Dumbledore missing. So I just thought it would make sense."

"Fine, we can add her to our list," Harry concluded. He looked down at the forgotten piece of parchment that lay on the bed between the two. "You know, we haven't even really used this list of yours. I mean, we already knew all the strengths and weaknesses of everybody, so it's not that useful."

Hermione twirled a strand of hair between her fingers absently at his words. "You're right. I didn't really see the point in creating one in the first place, but I figured it would be better to be safe than sorry."

"You mean you're in the habit of creating lists and tables for every little project, and this is no different?" Harry supplied helpfully.

Hermione slapped him playfully on the back of the head. "Oh, sod off you. I was just being...prepared is all."

"Speaking of being prepared," Harry began as he laughed at Hermione's antics, "let's get this finished up so we can do something productive."

Hermione stuck her tongue out at Harry in response, causing him to chuckle once more. He was definitely seeing a side of her that he normally didn't get a chance to see.

"Fine then," she said. "You choose the last person."

"Ron," Harry said immediately.

"No," Hermione retorted instantly. "Absolutely not."

"Why not?" Harry whined in a childish voice.

"Shall I list the reasons, Harry? I don't think he's ever spent more than ten seconds in the muggle world, so he'd stick out like a grown man playing in a child's ball pit."

Harry gave her a look that screamed 'are you kidding me?'

"Then there's the fact that he can't keep his mouth shut, even when doing something as simple as eating. He'd blow our cover so fast it'd make our heads spin. Not to mention the fact that he has all the subtlety of a rotting corpse in a fine restaurant."

"Where are you getting these analogies?" Harry asked, bewildered.

Hermione looked at the ground. "Daddy watches BBC2 a lot, especially Top Gear. I was just using some examples that Jeremy on there might use. That thing he said last night about wanting bridge to reach into his trousers? That came from the show."

Harry shook his head. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, daddy really does watch-"

"I meant about Ron."

"Oh, that. No, I'm not. He really is an uncouth, loudmouthed, gormless blighter. I mean, he can be a good friend, but the facts are the facts."

"Those might be true, but he is our best friend. How would it look if we didn't invite him? More to the point, how would he feel if we didn't invite him? He is a part of the trio after all."

"Yes, but he's also a bad fit for this trip."

Harry considered her words and argument carefully, and realized that she was right. However, that did not negate his belief that Ron should be invited. Suddenly, he was hit by an idea.

"I think we should invite him," he announced.

"But he would just get in the way and be a nuisance the entire trip," Hermione argued.

"I know," Harry replied with a smile. "But we should still invite him. That doesn't mean we have to take him, just invite him."

"But what if he accepts our invitation? How do you plan to back out of that without looking like a complete arse?"

"Molly won't let him go, we both know that. As much as I love the woman, she is a bit overbearing and won't let anybody take any risks. We'll invite him, but he'll have to ask Molly for permission, and she won't give it. She'll make him stay behind, which lets us get out of taking him. As much as I want him to go since he's my best mate, you are, of course, right about him."

Hermione scratched her chin as she considered Harry's idea. "That's not a bad idea," she said finally. "But I think we still need another person to help us out, especially since we're not taking Ron. And we're not taking any other Weasley's while we're at it. They're all too inexperienced with the muggle world, and with the red hair, they stick out too much. What about Tonks?"

"That's a great idea," he commented honestly. "But the only question is how easy it would be for her to get away from her Auror duties on such short notice."

"Good point. As much as I think her metamorphic abilities would be great to have, she does have a tendency to wear odd hair styles." Harry looked at her pointedly. "And she's kind of tied down here right now, I would assume. I don't think it would be fair to ask her, otherwise she might feel obligated to do something rash to put her job in jeopardy in order to come with us."

"Then the same applies to Kingsley too," Harry added.

"And don't even think about Moody," Hermione said, shuddering. "He'd be worse to bring than Ron."

"Snape."

"What?"

"We should bring Snape."

"Are you daft, Harry? Think about all of the problems that would cause, especially between you and him."

"But he's a Death Eater...technically, so that would help us out. He would be the perfect choice. He'd be able to blend in and would be able to have access to Malfoy at the same time."

"But what possible reason could he have to go?" Hermione pointed out. "I'm sure Voldemort would find out that's he's gone over there. And since Professor Snape said that Voldemort won't mention the situation any more, that would seem highly suspicious, don't you think?"

"Well, worst case scenario would be that he says no," Harry offered. "We could just ask him and see what he says. After all, I think he would be in a better position than we are to make that kind of decision. I just think we should ask him...almost as an olive branch."

"Olive branch, Harry? You mean you want to make peace with Professor Snape? That seems awful mature, even if a bit misguided in our current situation."

Harry rose from the bed to leave the room, and Hermione followed suit. "Let's just say that he doesn't think the world of me right now,

especially after I did something...not very smart in his office last term during one of our occlumency lessons."

"What?" she asked as they walked out the door.

"I can't talk about it. That wouldn't be right and would betray his trust."

The pair made their way downstairs to the first floor to start informing the others of their choices for the trip.

Harry and Hermione entered the sitting room to find Ron and Ginny engaged in a heated game of Exploding Snap, with Ginny with the upper hand. The two watched the game for a moment before interrupting.

"Ron, do you have a minute?" Harry asked, getting both Weasleys' attention.

Ron rose from his seat on the floor as Harry and Hermione sat on one of the sofas. Ginny sighed heavily and rose as well, before moving toward the room's exit.

"We'll only be a minute, Ginny," Hermione supplied helpfully as the youngest Weasley exited the room, pouting lightly.

Ron sat down in an armchair opposite Harry and Hermione.

"So, Ron, we told you that we'd tell you what's going on, and that's what we're here to do," Harry began. "Last night in the meeting, Snape told us that after my vision during the O.W.L.s, Voldemort became paranoid, thinking that I could read his mind or something. As a result, he took an object out of Bellatrix Lestrange's Gringotts vault and gave it to Lucius Malfoy to hide in his muggle casino in Las Vegas, in the States. We aren't sure what the item is, but we figure that, since Voldemort thinks its valuable enough to take out of Gringotts and send halfway around the world, it must be pretty important."

"Okay, so what does that mean then?" Ron asked.

"Well, Hermione's parents had invited me to go on holiday with them earlier in the summer, and we were going to leave next week. That's

why they're here, to spend some time before their trip with us. Originally, we were going to Florida, but Hermione's dad...Richard, decided to change the trip to Las Vegas instead, so that we could check out Malfoy's casino. Anyway, he didn't feel comfortable with just Hermione and I being the only two magical people going, so we're going through and deciding who else to invite."

"Your name came up," Hermione interjected, somewhat derisively.

Ron, however, did not notice her tone. He was too excited at the prospect of going on an Order mission to another country. "Really?" he asked excitedly. "You want me to go with you?"

"I never said that..." Hermione mumbled. "I just said his name came up." She looked at Ron's gleeful face and sighed. "Yes," she said finally, raising her voice.

"The only thing is, Ron, is that you'd have to follow our lead. We would be spending our entire time in the muggle world, and I know you aren't the most...knowledgeable about the muggle world. You'd have to do what we say, and act as we do."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Ron replied quickly, a dumb smile still plastered on his face.

"Well?" Hermione began. "Aren't you going to go ask your mother if you can go? We don't want to make plans for you to come without her permission, of course."

"Oh! Right!" Ron exclaimed, leaping to his feet. He burst out of the room, leaving Harry and Hermione in his wake.

"I almost feel sorry for him, running into the meat grinder like that," Hermione commented with a sad shake of her head. "Molly will tell him no, and that will crush his spirits."

"Wanna go watch?" Harry asked earnestly.

"I thought you'd never ask," she replied with equal vigor and a large smile as the two left the sitting room and crossed the foyer quietly to the kitchen. They crept into the kitchen and closed the door softly behind them, and waited.

"No, you are absolutely not going on some foolish quest around the world!" Molly screeched. "What possessed you to think I would ever say yes to something so irresponsible? You are too young to go off gallivanting around trying to save the world. That's for grownups to do!"

"But Harry and Hermione are going!" Ron protested.

"If Harry and Hermione jumped off of a broom, would you do that too?" Molly countered.

Harry glanced at Hermione and smiled as he shook his head. He had fallen off of a broom before.

"Maybe! It depends on what it was for!" Ron argued, not understanding the point of Molly's argument.

"Ron! The answer is no, and I will not hear any more on the subject, understood? Fred and George already threw away their future, and I will not have you doing the same, and that's final!"

She stormed out of the kitchen, leaving Ron, Harry, and Hermione alone.

"She's lucky she didn't wake the painting of Sirius's mother," Harry commented. "She was certainly loud enough."

Almost on cue, a loud shrieking filled the house.

"Get out you filthy blood traitor!" Walburga's portrait cried. She was obviously referring to Molly, who had exited the kitchen into the foyer where the portrait hung. "You dare defile my home with your filth? Kreacher! Kreacher! Remove this vermin from my house. Kreacher!"

Suddenly, the voice was drowned out, likely due either a silencing charm or the closing of the curtains. Harry couldn't understand why anyone would have opened the curtains in the first place though.

"Anyway..." he muttered, eliciting a giggle from Hermione.

The pair walked up to Ron as Harry clapped him on the shoulder for support. "Tough luck, eh mate?" he asked.

"Doesn't matter," Ron announced. "I'll just go anyway."

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry caught Hermione's look of abject horror, which she quickly hid beneath a mask of indifference. Harry realized he had to quickly defuse the situation.

"Are you sure that's such a good idea, mate?" he asked tentatively glancing back and forth between his two best friends. "How do you think your mum will react once she finds out you've gone with us behind her back? I reckon she'll be almost as cross as when she found out that the twins had dropped out of Hogwarts. Do you really want to cause that much trouble all over a little trip?"

"Little trip?" Ron balked. "You told me how important it was, and that's why I need to go! After all, it's for the Order! You can't get much more important than that!"

Hermione shook her head subtly at Ron's shortsightedness and small-minded view of the world. But she did not let Ron see her reaction. Harry, however, was a different story, as he noticed the shake of her head, which only hardened his resolve to press on in his attempt to convince Ron to stay.

"Ron, I'm sure we'll end up being fine without you. I don't want to antagonize your mum any more than I already did by going to the meeting last night. I'm sure that if you go with us, she'll end up finding some way to blame Hermione and I. Do you really want that?"

"Well, no," Ron replied sheepishly as he looked at the floor. "But I just wanted to go..."

"I know, Ron," Harry said in reassurance. "But I'm sure we'll be able to manage without you. Think of it this way: you can be our support back here if we end up needing anything. How about that?"

Hermione smirked at Harry's transparent attempt at giving Ron a useless task. But the redhead ate it up completely.

"Yeah, that'll work," he concluded. "Just make sure to let me know if you need anything while you're off on your international adventure, alright?"

"Sure thing," Harry responded half-heartedly, squeezing Ron's shoulder for support. "Now, I'm sure Ginny wants to finish up that game of Exploding Snap you were playing."

"Oh, I'm sure she does," Ron replied dryly. "She was winning. I'm not sure I want to go finish it."

"Go on, Ron," Hermione urged. "We've gotta talk with some other people too, and I'm sure you don't want to sit in on that. It'll get awfully boring."

Ron nodded and left the room, as Harry and Hermione released a collective sigh of relief.

"That was close," she breathed.

"But it's all taken care of now," Harry added. "Come on, let's talk to McGonagall and Snape."

Richard Granger stepped into the sitting room at Number 12, Grimmauld Place, and stopped short. Directly in front of him, on their hands and knees with their heads in the fireplace, were what he assumed to be his daughter and her best friend, Harry. He closed his eyes and shook his head before reopening them. However, nothing had changed. They were still on all fours on the floor, pressed up against each other side by side. Part of him wanted to go and physically separate them and stop whatever perverted ritual they were engaged in. But another part of him wanted to turn around, leave the room, and forget everything he had seen, remembering that they were not in a relationship and that, at least on Hermione's side, they were denying that the potential for one even existed. Eventually, that part won over, and he spun on his heel and left the sitting room, leaving Harry and Hermione alone once more.

Meanwhile, Harry and Hermione were not, as Richard believed, engaged in some inappropriate activity, but were instead conversing with Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape via the floo system.

"They are not going to keep me away from this castle unless they remove me from my post!" McGonagall declared, after Hermione had asked why she was in her Hogwarts office. "Besides, that woman seems to be away from the school for the summer, so she

isn't here to keep me away. Now, what can I do for you? Have you decided on who is going and who is staying?"

"That's actually what we called you for," Harry informed them. "Both of you, actually. Professor McGonagall—"

"Let me do this, Harry," Hermione offered. "You can do the other one." Her ghostly silhouette smiled ruefully. "Professor McGonagall, we'd actually like to have you come along with us. We just figured that with Professor Dumbledore gone, you would be in charge of the Order. It would make sense for us to invite you. Plus, I just thought it would be helpful to have you along."

McGonagall looked pensive for a moment as she considered the words of her star pupil. Finally, her look of contemplation was replaced with a warm smile. "I've been itching to do something productive ever since I got out of that sterile nightmare," she remarked, referring to the wizarding hospital. "It doesn't help that it's summer and, like it or not, there really isn't much to do at the school without a Headmaster. I'd love to come. I doubt the trip will be difficult, however, since we are only going to get information about what Lucius is hiding. I'm sure there'll be time to enjoy ourselves as well."

"Excellent!" Hermione exclaimed. "So you'll be ready to leave in a few days then, Professor?"

"Of course, Miss Granger...Hermione. And that leads me to something I want to mention. Since it is summer and I am going on holiday with you, I'd appreciate it if you both called me Minerva. For the summer only, that is," she clarified as she saw the exuberance on Harry's face. "It is not, NOT, I repeat, meant to give you free lease to call me by my first name once school resumes. Understood, Harry?"

"Yes...Minerva," he replied.

"Now, was there something else you wanted to discuss?" McGonagall asked.

Hermione perked up even more at this and grinned evilly at Harry. "Actually, Harry had something that he wanted to ask. Go ahead, Harry."

Harry turned to her and stuck his tongue out at her. "You'll be the death of me, woman," he muttered with a grin before turning back to the other two participants in the call. "Anyway...Professor Snape," he began with forced respect, "I was wondering if you wanted to join us as well. I thought that your experience with...espionage as well as your familiarity with the Death Eaters, would prove valuable."

"Potter, are you inviting me to come on holiday with you?" Snape sneered.

"I was thinking it would also be a nice thing to do," Harry responded through gritted teeth.

"While your nobility and generosity in this case astounds me, Potter, you have failed to consider an important point. What excuse would I have to go to Las Vegas? I would assume, based on your... heartfelt invitation, that you would employ my unique position to operate from within the Malfoy operation, am I correct?" He did not wait for a response. "I do recognize the unique handicap afforded to you by your ignorance and shortsightedness, but even I must scoff at your naiveté. How would I be able to blend into Malfoy's organization without a valid reason for visiting? Now, it may be true that I could accompany you and simply employ my investigative and surveillance abilities, but that would not be the most efficient use of my talents, would it?"

"Perhaps this would be an excellent opportunity to teach young Mr. Malfoy about the workings of his father's business ventures?" McGonagall suggested with a small smile at Harry.

"I question the effectiveness of that idea, Minerva," Snape complained. "Contrary to popular belief, I am not Mr. Malfoy's godfather. The short notice of the excursion could cause some problems as well."

"And yet Severus, you are quite good friends with his father, not to mention Draco's favorite Hogwarts professor. If anyone has the ability to steer him away from the ranks of You-Know-Who, it would be you. I think you should take advantage of that. Contact him, tell him that you think it is time that he learned more about his father's dealings, and offer to take him to Las Vegas to observe them

firsthand. Granted, it might seem a bit forced, but if anyone can sell it, it would be you."

Snape sighed. "If I do this, I will be unable to travel with the rest of you. I must arrive separately, preferably first to allay suspicion. I will also be unable to interact with your group as much as you may desire."

"That's perfectly alright," Harry agreed.

"And you may not call me Severus. There are some lines that a professor must not cross, and that is one of them."

"Right..." Harry replied slowly. "Well then, I guess we'll see you there...sir."

Harry and Hermione withdrew their heads from the fireplace after ending the call with McGonagall and Snape and rose to their feet. As they turned around, they found Sirius, Remus, Ellen, and Richard sitting on the sofas in the sitting room.

"Um," Harry began, scratching the back of his head absently, "what're you guys doing here?"

"Richard told us you two were fooling around on the floor, so we naturally had to come down here and watch," Sirius replied.

"I don't think those were his exact words," Ellen corrected with a smirk at Harry and Hermione's embarrassed expressions.

"We were, um, just calling Professor McGonagall...I mean Minerva, and Professor Snape. We were asking them to come with us. Speaking of which, Remus," Harry turned his attention to the werewolf, "you wanna come too? I'm sure Sirius here wouldn't want to be without you, since I think you mean a lot to him."

Remus's eyes widened slightly at Harry's insinuation, and he glanced over at Sirius who was simply shaking his head.

"Harry," he began, "I'm sorry to tell you this, but you never would have cut it as a Marauder. I mean, you can sometimes come up with some good insults, but that one was just pathetic."

"I'm sorry if I don't have as much experience insulting people as you do, Sirius. It might be because I'm an all around nice guy, and you're just an old wanker, but I can't be sure. Remus, what do you think?"

"About Sirius or about going with you? If you're talking about Sirius, then I think you're spot on, Harry. He is a creepy old man, but that's neither here nor there. As for going with you to the States, I can't see a reason not to. In fact, I quite think I'd enjoy it, if only to protect you from Sirius's immature foolishness."

"Great!" Harry exclaimed. "Now we won't have to worry about stupid pranks from Sirius."

"Ah, you might be right about that one, Harry," Remus agreed, "but you might still have to worry about pranks from both of us. You do realize that you're putting the two remaining true Marauders together at one time in a foreign land, which is ripe for pranking, don't you?"

"Yeah...I never thought of that," Harry admitted, glancing at the floor. "But at the very least we'll have Minerva along too to keep you two on a short leash, if you get my meaning."

Richard and Ellen appeared confused at Harry's inside joke, but didn't mention it. Instead, Richard changed the subject.

"Then if we're all set with who's going, we're gonna need to buy our tickets. Since its such late notice, we might not be able to get seats together. But if that's what we gotta do..." He rose from his seat. "I don't suppose you have a computer here, do you?" he asked. "I remember Hermione telling me something about muggle technology not working in a magical house, but I don't want to assume."

"Nope," Sirius replied. "I wouldn't even know what to do with one if I had one. I don't know anything about the damned things. But your question does remind me of something that I have to take care of."

"What about a telephone?" Richard asked.

"Never needed one," Sirius answered. "I don't really know anybody in the muggle world...or didn't used to, so I didn't need one. The floo system works just as well."

Richard sighed. "Then I'm gonna need to go back to our house to make the changes to our trip. The Internet will be the easiest way, but even then, it might take a little while, depending on how difficult British Airways decides to be today. Oh, and I've gotta find a hotel now too..."

"Actually, Richard, do you mind if Remus and I come with you? I'm actually interested to see one of these computers in action, and Remus and I have something we need to take care of that we're gonna need your help with."

Remus looked at him curiously. "We do?" he asked.

Sirius gave him a significant look. "Yes, we do. Remember?"

Suddenly, Remus's face lit up with recognition. "Oh, right! Yeah we do have something that we'll need your help with, Richard. If it wouldn't be too much trouble..."

Richard shrugged. "Fine by me. You coming too, Ellen?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Somebody's got to stay here and keep an eye on things. And I certainly don't think I want Molly here alone with the kids, especially since she's been in a mood all day. You go on ahead."

"Do you need anything from the house that you want me to pick up?"

She thought for a moment before shaking her head. "Not that I can remember. You boys have fun now, you hear?"

Sirius and Remus rose from their seats and moved toward the fireplace with Richard. Richard grabbed a handful of floo powder from the container on the mantle and threw it down at his feet.

"37 Baskerville Road, Covington, Swindon," he called out, disappearing in the green flames. Sirius and Remus followed suit immediately afterward, disappearing as well.

"Well," Ellen announced as soon as they had disappeared, her excitement bubbling over, "tell me a bit about yourself, Harry."

"Don't do it, Harry," Hermione warned.

"Why?" he asked.

"Yes, Hermione, why?" Ellen asked as well, her head cocked, awaiting an answer.

"She'll just use it against you...or me," Hermione replied softly.

Harry's eyes darted between mother and daughter, trying to decide on the best course of action. Finally, he decided on a plan that, he hoped, would thread the eye of the needle. "Well, I'm fifteen, almost sixteen," he began, trying to give some obvious information to appease Ellen, while still protecting his and Hermione's dignity. The last thing he wanted was for Ellen to be able to embarrass them, especially after hearing what he had heard the night before. Knowing what he knew of the Grangers, and especially Ellen, he felt that it was a distinct possibility that she would do so, should she have enough information.

"Yes, yes, I know that," Ellen said, waving him off. "But I want to know about you. If I'm gonna spend a holiday with you, I might as well know something about you, right?" Harry had to admit that her explanation did at least make some sense. "And even though Hermione's told me almost everything she knows about you," Hermione's face reddened at this, "I still don't think I know very much."

"Well...I play Quidditch," Harry said lamely.

"I know that already. You have the most important position on the team. Or so Hermione says. Tell me something that isn't known by half of the wizarding world."

"Um..." Harry racked his mind to try and come up with something. "I once performed accidental apparition onto the roof of my school," he told her finally.

"Really?" Ellen asked with unbridled interest. "Why was that?"

Hermione shook her head as Harry seemed to open up. "Why, Harry?" she whispered to herself. "Why?"

"Well, my cousin and his gang were playing their favorite game-

"Which was?" Ellen asked.

"Harry Hunting," Harry replied. "They'd chase me down and try and beat me up without getting caught. However, if they got caught, they'd find a way to blame it on me. But anyway, in this case, they were chasing me when suddenly, I found myself on the roof of the school. It took over an hour for them to get me down from there, at which point I was the laughing stock of the school. Uncle Vernon was none too pleased, to say the least."

"And what did he do?"

"I...erm....got locked in my....room," Harry finished lamely.

"Well, that doesn't sound too bad," Ellen replied. "For how long?"

Not wanting to reveal the truth, Harry fibbed...slightly. "I, um...don't remember."

Ellen looked at Harry strangely, evaluating his response. "Uh huh," she said skeptically. However, knowing better than to press him on the issue, she let the matter drop. "Well, I think I'll go see what Molly's up to," she announced. "Maybe she and I can have a bit of a chat. I haven't really got to talk to her properly since we got here." Ellen rose from the sofa and left the room, leaving Harry and Hermione alone once more.

"I told you," Hermione said once she was gone. "I told you it was a bad idea to talk to her. You have no idea what you've started, Harry."

July 18, 2011

3:49 PM

Richard Granger stepped out of the fireplace in the sitting room of Grimmauld Place and took in the empty room. Sirius and Remus had gone through the floo system a moment before, leaving him to follow after doing one final check of his residence in Covingham. Earlier that day, he and the other two had returned there to make the final arrangements for their trip to the States, slated for a mere

six days later. Despite his earlier predictions, it had not been exceptionally difficult to change their flight and destination from Florida to McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas. However, due to the short notice, he had been unable to get seven seats that were nearby. As a result, he was forced to purchase three pairs of seats and one lone seat for the seventh passenger. However, from what he remembered from his past international travel experience as well as the seat map he had seen online, that issue should not be a big deal, due to the configuration of the plane.

At the same time, he had naturally been forced to choose new lodgings, eventually finding one that offered relatively good rates while not being completely booked. The one problem with traveling to Las Vegas during the summer, he had found, was that many resorts are completely full due to the large influx of vacationers.

After that, he had helped Sirius and Remus with their errand, and he now understood why they asked him to come along. He just hoped that Harry would end up being pleased.

"So how'd it go?" Ellen's voice jerked away from his thoughts.

"We're leaving bright and early on the 24th," he replied.

"What does 'bright and early' mean?"

"Seven o'clock in the morning. But there weren't many options that day from Heathrow to Vegas, and I also had to take into consideration the time change. We won't actually get in until almost three o'clock in the afternoon, their time."

"That's fine with me, but I don't know how the kids will take it. Well, scratch that. I don't know how well Harry will take it. Hermione's one who can get up early with no problems. Everything I know about teenage boys screams the exact opposite about them."

Richard shrugged. "Well, he'll have plenty of time to sleep on the flight."

"Well then, based on your attitude, I can tell you couldn't care less about it then. So do you want to be the one to break the news to him then?" his wife asked, nodding toward the door to the foyer. Richard grimaced slightly before nodding and leading the way.

End of Chapter 5

A/N: So this was a relatively short chapter overall. However, it was also the last of what I like to call the "bricklaying" chapters, meaning the chapters that provide the initial introduction and back story. Chapter 6 will begin the story proper. In the mean time, I just wanted to tie together a lot of various aspects, including cementing who was going and who was staying. I also didn't want to take too many characters and turn this into an ensemble story, simply due to the fact that I wouldn't have enough for all of the extra characters to do. I'm in good shape with who I have going as it is. I also want to make one little apology: if for some reason something seemed off in this chapter (which I can't say will be the case), then it is due to the fact that my brain is a pile of mush at this point. I've come down with a cold that's been going around, so it takes tremendous effort for me to do even the most basic mental tasks, especially in the wee hours of the morning. But, that's all water under the bridge, so on with the show!

Chapter Title Hint: The next chapter deals with the group's departure from Britain. Personally, I felt the title I chose was a great fit for the chapter, especially considering recent events for me personally. Just the other day, I gave someone a ride to the airport on a pretty windy morning. On the way back, I let this song play, which seemed to fit perfectly.

Aside from that hint, there isn't a whole lot of business to take care of at the end of this chapter. I do ask that, if you have any suggestions about my writing style or other tips, please let me know. I'm always trying to improve my delivery for future stories. However, I will point out that if there are aspects of this story that are not sufficiently realistic for some readers, it may be purposeful, in order to keep the lighthearted and fun tone of the story. This entire story is based around a somewhat unrealistic premise to begin with, which was chosen partially on the basis of it being fun and entertaining.

Also pertaining to chapter titles, there is a hint as to the title of chapter 20 hidden within chapter 4. The only hint I'll give is that it is hidden in a line of dialogue. If you're a glutton for punishment or just really want to re-read that chapter and get a head start on what's to come in the story, it's hiding in there waiting to be found.

Finally, I just want to take care of one final thing, relating to the title for this chapter. If you like this little gimmick, then I will continue to do it for future chapters. Otherwise, please let me know. But due to FFnet's rules, I cannot put a real link. So I'll do it this way:

"If I were a Youtube video, my address would be /watch?v=0Allz08fZos. Now, that's not to say that I am a Youtube video...I was just speaking hypothetically."

Thank you again for reading, and please leave a review if you enjoy my writing. I'll see you again soon with chapter 6.

Chapter 6

Ride the Wild Wind

July 24, 2011

3:59 AM

Harry groaned as he turned over in his bed and covered his face with his pillow. He knew that it was quickly approaching four o'clock in the morning, when he was supposed to get up, but that was not something that he was looking forward to. He had made the unwise decision to stay up until just after midnight with Ron, playing wizard's chess. He had had shorter nights before, so he figured that he would be just fine with less than five hours of sleep. However, what he hadn't counted on was the fact that he was excited for the trip. Too excited. Too excited to sleep properly. As a result, Harry had spent most of the night tossing and turning in his bed, trying to calm his mind down enough to sleep. But to no avail.

As he wallowed in his own misery, Harry heard a creaking from the other side of the room as his door opened softly.

"Harry?" Ellen asked softly. "Time to get up Harry."

Harry grumbled incoherently in response.

"Come on, Harry," Ellen pressed. "You knew we'd have to get up early this morning."

"Don' wanna," he whined into his pillow as he pushed his face into it further.

"Harry," Ellen said, the patience lessened in her voice, "you've got five minutes before I send Sirius in here to wake you up. I don't think you want that, do you?" She turned and left the room, closing the door audibly on the way out.

With a final groan, Harry rolled over and out of bed, stretching as he did so. After hearing a few healthy pops, he relaxed and left the room to head downstairs to the kitchen.

He entered the kitchen in his oversized flannel sleep pants and sat down at the large table. Ellen walked into the kitchen a moment later, followed by a drowsy Hermione who sat down next to Harry. As soon as she sat down, Hermione promptly dropped her head into her arms on the table and tried to fall back asleep.

"Oh, come off it, Hermione," Richard commented as he came into the kitchen, "you've been up earlier. You had plenty of time to sleep, so I don't want to hear you complaining."

"Tea Harry? Hermione?" Ellen offered, sitting down at the table after making her own cup. "We're not gonna have breakfast here this morning, since it's too early. We'll just eat in the airport." Harry shook his head, declining the offer, while Hermione grunted in the negative. "Well you're certainly a lively bunch this morning. Come on, look alive. We'll be leaving in a little while, and then there won't be time to sit around."

"There'll be plenty of time to sit around," Hermione argued sleepily, "we'll be on the plane for more than fifteen hours."

"True, but you know how hard it is to sleep on a plane," Ellen pointed out. "You've always been too excited to sleep on planes; wanting to see something new, go on a new adventure."

"I've been on plenty of adventures in the last few years, thank you very much," she retorted. "But," she paused as she yawned widely, "that shower's not going to take itself. If I fall asleep in the shower, don't wake me...please."

"We'll just send Harry in to check on you then," Sirius announced as he entered the room, fully dressed and wide awake.

"I think not!" Richard exclaimed.

"And how are you so wide awake so bloody early in the morning?" Hermione asked.

"Hermione! Language," Ellen chided.

Sirius whistled quietly as he made his way over to the counter to partake of the tea Ellen had made. "Just an early riser, I guess," he replied.

"Early riser my-" Harry began to complain, only to be interrupted by Hermione.

"Harry..." Hermione warned.

"What?" he asked innocently. "Why is it that you can talk like that, but I can't?"

"I'll be upstairs," Hermione announced, completely ignoring Harry's question. "Be back down in a little bit."

She left the kitchen, leaving the other four to sit quietly as two of them drank their morning tea.

"Shouldn't you two be drinking coffee instead?" Harry asked.

"Fresh out," Sirius responded. "With Molly and the kids here, we're going through food faster than usual. Plus, with the trip coming up, I didn't have Kreacher get any extra food, since I didn't want to seem like I was inviting Molly to stay longer. I figure if there's no food, there'll be no reason for her to stay."

"Right...such a welcoming host you are, Sirius."

"I do my best," he replied with a grin as he took another sip. "Now, go get ready, Harry. Knowing you, you probably haven't packed yet, which means you're going to need extra time. If you hurry, I won't tell Hermione how unprepared you are."

Harry scowled lightheartedly at his godfather before rising from the table.

"Oh, and Harry?" Sirius called as Harry stepped out of the kitchen, "come on back down here when you're done. There's something I want to take care of before we leave."

"Okay..." Harry replied uncertainly as he left the room to return upstairs to get ready.

After showering and hastily packing his trunk with what ended up being most of his belongings, Harry dragged his trunk downstairs and set it next to the front door. Remus, who was also coming

downstairs, freshly showered and ready, dropped a small carry bag next to Harry's trunk. Harry presumed that that was the older man's luggage for the trip.

"Are you really bringing your Hogwarts trunk?" Remus asked as he looked at Harry's oversized luggage. Harry nodded in response. "Well, we'll have to do something about that then, won't we?"

Remus pulled out his wand and aimed it at Harry's trunk. A moment later, a large black, wheeled suitcase rested in its place.

As he tucked his wand away, Remus explained. "That should be a bit easier to carry, not to mention blend in a bit better, don't you think?"

"I guess so. Thanks Remus."

"Any time, Harry. Now, I think Sirius wanted to see you in the sitting room before we left if I'm not too mistaken. Let's see if he's ready." Remus led the way out of the foyer and into the sitting room where Sirius, Ellen, Richard, Hermione, and Minerva were gathered. Harry assumed the McGonagall had arrived while he was in the shower. Hermione, for her part, was idly playing with her damp hair, struggling to work out any knots.

"Why wouldn't I be ready?" Sirius asked as the pair of Harry and Remus entered the room.

"Well, knowing you," Remus began, "I wouldn't bet the other way, let me just say that."

"So what did you want to see me about?" Harry asked as he surveyed the room. "You didn't invite all of these good people here under the pretense that they would see me do stand-up, did you? Because Sirius, you know I'm retired!"

"Har har, Harry," Sirius laughed disingenuously. "There's a real knee-slapper. No, seriously, I did want to give you something before we left." He pulled a relatively large box out from behind the sofa and rose to hand it to Harry.

"What is it?" Harry asked as he moved to shake the box.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Richard said quickly.

Harry looked at him curiously. "So you're in on this too. Does this have anything to do with that little errand you helped The Brothers Mutt here with the other day?"

"Richard Granger does not comment on rumours or speculation," Richard announced diplomatically. "Now just open it."

Harry took one last look around the room before tearing into the solid colored deep green paper.

"We figured since it's your birthday in a week and we'll be on holiday, we might as well give you your gift now," Sirius explained as Harry continued to open the gift.

As he tore the final bits of paper from the package and got his first look at his gift, Harry looked up. "Is this...real?" he asked.

Sporting a broad grin, Sirius nodded. "I thought of it that night when you called me from Hogwarts and told me about your cousin. I knew I just had to get you one, but I knew nothing about them, so I had to take Richard along to help. Remus is in on it too, so it's from both of us."

Harry looked down again at the large box to see the image of a new notebook computer staring back at him along with a carrying case.

"I thought muggle electronics didn't work in magical homes?" Hermione asked, peering over at the box. She couldn't see the exact specifications, but it at least appeared to be a good, brand-name computer.

"They don't," Sirius confirmed. "But it's not on now, is it? That's why we gave it to you now. We knew you couldn't use it while you're staying here, but since you kind of hinted about wanting one when we talked that night before term ended, we thought that our holiday would be the perfect opportunity to get you one. That way you can use it while we're gone."

Harry discarded the paper as he examined the box closely.

"Oh, just think about it, Harry!" Hermione exclaimed. "You could get so much homework...er...stuff done on the flight with that!"

"Don't I need to charge it first though?" he asked, his limited understanding of electronics kicking in.

"Yes," Richard replied, "but if we leave for the airport early enough, you might have time to charge it using their outlets. There's even Internet access there too so that you can kill the time while we're waiting for our flight."

"Yeah," Harry began, somewhat sheepishly, "I wouldn't know the first thing about getting this thing on the Internet. Sad, I know, considering the times we live in, but the Dursleys never let me touch their computer, and I was never allowed to go to the library in Little Whinging to use theirs. But," he added, perking up, "I guess there's no time like the present to learn, right? Thanks a lot Sirius, Remus. And thanks Mr. Granger for helping them out with buying it too, although I am kind of curious what they would have come up with without you..."

Richard shuddered slightly at the thought. Although he didn't really know the boy, all he had had to offer was his knowledge of muggle electronics, which was not much of a sacrifice, if he was honest. However, watching Sirius, and to a lesser extent, Remus, in the big box electronics store, had been quite amusing, to say the least. Richard had a sneaking suspicion that, had he not been present, Sirius would have offered the store more than the asking price for the computer, just on the basis that he had no idea what it was and the fact that the salesperson was 'nice.' In the end, Richard had suggested a middling computer, in order to keep costs down, while still giving something that would be functional into the near future.

Harry rose, clutching his newest possession, and everyone else slowly followed suit.

"Can I just ask," Sirius began as they stood, "what in Merlin's name is an Internet?"

Hermione's tired eyes suddenly brightened at the prospect of explaining something so complicated. But her father beat her to it.

"Think of it this way," he began as they grabbed their luggage, "it's like the world at your fingertips. It's as close to magic as the muggle world has ever gotten, with the ability to do almost anything instantly..."

Harry turned to Hermione as Richard and Sirius continued to talk in the background.

"He just had to go and burst your bubble, didn't he?" Harry asked, referring to the fact that Richard had answered the question instead of Hermione.

"He's always done that, that's why I'm always the one whose hand is in the air first when a question comes up. I've always had to race him to answer."

Harry threw a friendly arm around her shoulder. "Well, just think of it this way: we're gonna go to Las Vegas and deal with a situation that requires knowledge of the magical world. I have no doubt you'll find a way to show him up then. Just you wait and see."

"Thanks Harry," she whispered with a smile. "Now come on, we've got to get going otherwise we'll miss our flight."

"But it doesn't leave for a couple of hours yet!" he objected as he dropped his arm from her shoulder as she made a move for her luggage.

"But I don't know how long it'll take to get through security," she replied. "I've never gone through the magical area of an airport before. It could take longer." She was, of course, referring to Remus's explanation from a few days before that Heathrow, like many other major airports, did offer forms of magical transportation, and even included a magical reception area.

"Not bloody likely," Harry replied under his breath. "They have magic. How long could it possibly take?" But before Hermione could respond, Harry was struck with a sudden realization. "Sirius!" he exclaimed, getting the older man's attention from across the room.

"Yeah, pup?" he asked, turning to face Harry and face away from McGonagall, who had just drawn her wand and pointed it at Sirius.

"You can't go to Heathrow, remember? You're still a wanted man!"

Sirius chuckled in response. "Way ahead of you there, kiddo. Minnie here was gonna take care of that for me."

"A glamour charm?" Harry asked. Sirius and McGonagall nodded. "But what about when we have to go through magical security? We are using the floo to get to the magical area of the airport, remember? I'm sure they check for glamour charms."

"Harry," Remus interjected comfortingly, "I've done my fair share of muggle traveling. It's cheaper than magical travel, at least internationally. But I've always gone into the magical departure terminal before going into the muggle part of the airport, so I know this from experience: you only have to go through magical security if you are travelling magically. Otherwise, they leave it to the muggles to deal with."

"Isn't that pretty irresponsible?" Hermione asked bluntly. "I mean, I understand the whole point of security, but couldn't a wizard or witch just use magic to commit some crime in the muggle world and it would go undetected?"

Remus shrugged. "I never said it makes sense. It's simply the way the magical and muggle governments have agreed to run things, since the muggles want some sort of control over their own affairs. So far, from what I hear, it's worked out pretty well, since there haven't been any major incidents that have proven the system to be a failure."

"So relax, Harry, and let's get going," Sirius added, turning around to face Harry once more. His once dark hair had been replaced by graying blonde, and his facial hair had completely disappeared. A bit more fat had been added to his face, to change his facial structure, giving Sirius an almost completely new appearance.

"Ready?" he asked as he picked up the handle of his luggage and looked at Harry and nodded toward the fireplace.

July 24, 2011

4:53 AM

Harry hated the floo network. Ever since he had mistakenly ended up in Knockturn Alley in the summer before his second year, he had had a pathological hatred for the magical method of transportation. He would have much rather flown the distance to Heathrow Airport, or even taken a portkey, despite its nauseating effects. The floo system though, just made him dizzy, especially due to the fact that it was nowhere near instantaneous. In fact, he would have rather crawled the distance from Grimmauld Place to Heathrow, but that was not an option he was presented with.

He also hated the fact that he could never make it through the floo system standing up.

This time was no different.

As his vision cleared from the trip and he picked himself up, Harry was greeted by an expansive, modern looking curved room with a glass ceiling supported by great white arches and light gray concrete floors. After he had regained his bearings, Harry tightened his grip on the handle of his suitcase and stepped through the threshold and into the airport reception area before stepping to the side to wait for the others to arrive. As he waited, Harry took in his immediate surroundings.

Instead of the dark, drab interior that he remembered from the Ministry of Magic atrium when he had visited for his hearing, this magical reception area was bright, spacious, and modern looking. Brushed metal accents of various shapes lined one wall, as the other was completely taken up by one long, solid pane of glass overlooking the tarmac. As he turned around, Harry found that the roughly dozen fireplaces themselves were nothing like the antique relics that adorned the Ministry atrium, but were made of a dull, brushed metal similar to the decorative panels on the wall. The floo arrival points were also cordoned off from the rest of the magical terminal by a large, semi-circular half-wall, with only one entry and one exit. Both were staffed by two guards.

Suddenly, a fireplace to his left flared up, depositing Richard Granger, who stumbled a bit as he landed, but quickly regained his balance and brushed himself off before stepping away from the fireplace with his luggage.

Other fireplaces around the terminal continued to flare up and deposit visitors, most of whom Harry did not recognize. However, almost at regular intervals, another member of his party would emerge from a random fireplace and make their way over to the slowly growing group that had formed around Harry.

Once the group was completely assembled, Sirius took the lead and made his way over to the break in the dividing wall labeled 'Exit/Departures.' He stepped up to the nearest counter and presented a magical identification card that he pulled from his pocket.

"Where'd he get that?" Harry whispered to Hermione. She just shrugged in response as she turned her attention back to Sirius and the bored looking male guard.

"And your destination, sir?" he asked in a monotone voice.

"New York, in the States," Sirius replied in an accent unfamiliar to Harry. "But I'm travelling muggle," he added.

The guard nodded slowly, not seeming to care, and handed Sirius's identification back to him. "Then have a nice flight Mr. Andreyovichosky," he said with forced politeness before calling the next person forward as Sirius stepped away and pretended to be interested in the massive glass wall, in order to avoid being associated with the others.

Harry and Hermione chuckled at Sirius, just as Harry was stepped forward to the other guard, as the side of the counter used by Sirius was currently occupied by other travelers.

Rightly assuming that Harry did not possess identification, the guard asked his name.

"Harry Potter," Harry replied with mock arrogance.

"That's bollocks kid and you know it. I can tell you that Potter would never be allowed to leave the country with the tripe he's been spewing lately. Now what's your real name?" the guard retorted.

"Well, Mr..." Harry glanced at the small nametag affixed to the guard's chest, "Bomley, I find your lack of faith disturbing."

"Look kid, I don't have time for this. Either tell me your real name or I'll report you to the Ministry."

"Fine," Harry grumbled. He rapidly searched his mind for a pair of names that would somehow fit together. "Manuel Florencio," he said finally, glancing back at Hermione who was simply shaking her head.

"And where are you going?" Bomley asked, forcing Harry to think again. His mind immediately went to the ancient globe he had been playing with the night before in between moves in his chess game with Ron. One of the advantages...and disadvantages of playing chess with Ron is that his moves could sometimes take a long time as he tried to perfect his strategy.

"Tijuana, Mexico," Harry replied curtly. "I've got muggle family there that are flying me over to visit."

"Fine," Bomley replied as he stamped a piece of parchment and handed it to Harry, calling forward the next traveler. Harry looked down at the parchment to see that he had been granted clearance from the floo network. He looked up to see Sirius tucking away a similar piece of parchment. Harry realized he must have missed Sirius receiving his copy when he was laughing with Hermione. He walked over to Sirius and stood by the massive window as other magical travelers milled around and went about their business.

"That has to be the most worthless security I've ever seen," Harry commented as he gazed out the window.

"What do you expect from those quacks at the Ministry?" Sirius asked from beside him. "They haven't been able to catch me in three years, and remember, I'm an escaped 'murderer.'" He used finger quotes on the last word. "So how well do you expect them to do when barring you from leaving the country?"

A few minutes later, after all members of their party had passed through the pathetic excuse for a check-in, the seven followed the overhead hanging signs toward the barrier between the muggle and magical portions of the airport. As they walked, they passed by various counters offering to sell different international portkeys, and some advertising low-price international floo travel.

However, as the massive magical terminal curved toward its terminus, there was one kiosk, embedded in the wall itself, that was larger than any others.

"Ah, there it is," Sirius commented, taking off toward it.

Harry looked closer only to see that it was a small Gringotts branch, complete with a handful of goblins. Signs outside the bank offered various services, including currency exchange, last minute withdrawals, and travel insurance.

Sensing that this may be his last chance to withdraw some gold from his account, Harry followed Sirius into the bank, leaving the other members of their party behind. After waiting in line for a few minutes behind Sirius, Harry was called up to one of the three reception counters.

He rummaged around in his pocket for his Gringotts key, which he had made sure to not leave alone at Grimmauld Place due to the fact that house-elves are allowed to withdraw money from vaults.

"I'd like to withdraw some money," he said as he placed his key on the counter.

"Naturally," the goblin teller snarled. "We don't do much else here. How much did you want?"

Harry thought for a moment about what amount would be reasonable to take on a trip of this nature. "How much do I have available exactly?" he asked.

The teller rolled his eyes and stretched out his left hand and waited. A brief moment later, a piece of parchment flew into his hand, and he slid it across the counter to Harry. Harry flipped it over to see a five digit number. "Is that a lot?" he asked, knowing next to nothing of magical finance.

"Twelve thousand galleons," the teller whispered impatiently, glancing at the parchment, "is no small sum. However, it is also the balance of your trust account, the account that was designated for use during your Hogwarts years. Due to the fact that you are still a minor, I cannot give you a balance of your family's main vault. You

will be contacted by Gringotts when you come of age, in order to discuss that matter."

Looking back down at the parchment, Harry made up his mind about the current transaction. "How about one thousand galleons?" he asked, maintaining his civility in the face of the goblin's previously unmasked nastiness.

The goblin's eyes bulged slightly at Harry's request. "Are you quite certain of this?" he asked uncertainly, all hostility gone from his voice.

"Well, yeah," Harry replied. "And can you convert it to muggle Pounds as well? I'll be doing a bit of travelling and I can get it converted to the local currency when I get there."

The goblin nodded and disappeared into a back room for a moment. While he was gone, Harry took the opportunity to look around the small alcove tucked away in the wall of the terminal. While the inside of the airport itself seemed to be decorated with a modern flair, the inside of the bank hearkened back to the antiquated look of the main Gringotts branch in Diagon Alley. Harry was certain that this branch was much newer than the one in Diagon Alley, which led him to assume that it was simply decorated in a similar fashion for uniformity.

As he looked around, Harry noticed that Sirius had concluded his business and was leaving. As he walked by, Sirius stopped by Harry.

"So what'd you need to do?" Harry asked him.

"Just get a little bit of spending money out," Sirius replied. "You never know when you'll need it. Or how much," he added with a wink before leaving the bank.

A moment later, Harry's goblin teller returned, carrying what appeared to be a normal leather wallet.

"May I ask if you have a muggle wallet, Mr. Potter?" the goblin asked respectfully, much more aware of Harry's identity and status now that he had seen his balance statement and had likely spoken to his superiors during his absence.

Harry shook his head in the negative. He had never needed one, especially since the Dursleys had never allowed him to have money. Any time he had carried money in the wizarding world, it had been galleons, which were simply gold coins that he carried around in his pocket. He had never needed to own a wallet.

"Then I have taken the liberty of having one prepared for you," the goblin announced proudly.

"Prepared?" Harry questioned.

"Correct," the goblin confirmed. "This is no ordinary muggle wallet. It has been tailored to respond to your touch only. It will not open for any others. Normally these wallets are reserved for international travelers only, due the inherent danger in international travel. While I do not know your destination for certain, I think we can both agree that you are travelling internationally today, so that I may provide you with this wallet courtesy of Gringotts?" he gave Harry a significant look, causing the latter to nod tentatively.

"Excellent!" the goblin exclaimed ,baring his sharp teeth menacingly. "I have also taken the liberty of loading this wallet with your withdrawal already. At the current exchange rate, your one thousand galleon withdrawal has been converted into exactly £10000. I have waived the normal one percent conversion charge as a courtesy."

That seemed like more than Harry had anticipated, but he did not question it. Instead, he asked the other question on his mind.

"How were you able to get the wallet to respond only to me? I haven't done anything to key it to me."

"Ah, Mr. Potter, you underestimate the resources of Gringotts. Do you think that we do not have your blood on record, or your muggle fingerprint? Either of those would be acceptable means of identification for this wallet, and we have incorporated them into it." The goblin hand the wallet over to Harry, who promptly put it in the back pocket of his oversized jeans. "Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

Harry, still in shock at the sudden change in the goblin's demeanor, shook his head. "No, thank you," he replied politely as he turned and exited the bank.

He met up with the rest of the group, and was immediately pestered by a round of questions, mainly from the Grangers.

"What was that all about, Harry?" Richard asked.

"I just needed to get some money out for the trip."

"Oh," Richard replied. "How much?" His wife suddenly elbowed him sharply in the side. "Ow! I mean...nevermind that question."

"What did the goblins have to say, Harry?" Hermione asked, changing the subject away from her father's lack of tact. "You were in there longer than I would think it takes for a withdrawal."

"Oh, I just had them convert the galleons to muggle money. And they gave me a magical wallet that will only open for me. So don't even think about trying anything, Sirius." He glared pointedly at his godfather before smiling.

"Why do you think I would ever do anything like steal from my own godson?" Sirius asked innocently.

"Because I've seen and heard of you doing far worse," Harry explained. "I wouldn't put it past you."

"You wound me, Harry!" Sirius complained as he clutched his chest. Harry only shook his head as the group took off once more.

The group continued to walk until they saw the curving terminal narrow to a much smaller, but still relatively wide, opening. As they neared, they could see crowds milling about on the other side of the opening, as well as various signs of muggle activity.

"I would assume that the rest of the airport is just through there," Ellen commented.

"Right," Remus answered. "We just walk through. It's like walking through the barrier at Platform 9 ¾. Just turn around once you go through. You'll see what I mean."

The eclectic group of magical tourists passed through the opening and into the muggle portion of Heathrow Airport. After they did so,

they turned around to see that, instead of being able to see into the magical reception area, they saw a large billboard for Rolex watches.

"Clever," Richard commented. "But what's to stop us from looking like we just appeared out of nowhere?"

"I'm assuming there is some kind of muggle-repelling charm," Minerva speculated. "Or perhaps some form of the confundus charm." Seeing the confused looks on Richard and Ellen's faces, she elaborated. "I would assume that, if you were not already aware of the entrance to the magical area of the airport, you would simply mistake this for a traditional advertisement, and pay it no attention. If you are not paying attention, then you would not notice strangers appearing out of thin air."

"Makes sense," Richard replied, realizing too that the great glass wall inside the magical area must be one-way as well, to prevent the magical world from being seen. "But I think we're going to be running short on time here soon. Should we go and get our tickets and check in?"

July 24, 2011

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Richard returned from the ticketing machine, having electronically checked in to their flight. He had then checked in their luggage, leaving only a handful of small bags such as purses and, of course, Harry's computer bag. Richard passed out the boarding passes, which had been labeled with each person's name. Due to the fact that they were now traveling in the muggle world, their names no longer mattered. The fact that muggle and magical security was segregated only helped matters in this case.

"Now, according to this, our flight is going to begin boarding at about 6:35," Richard explained. "So we've got just over an hour to get through security and find our terminal and gate. We are flying out of Terminal Five, so we're already there, since this is where British Airways is based. We just need to pass through security find Gate F and we'll be all set."

Fifteen minutes later found the seven through security and sitting at Gate F. Due to the fact that it was still early in the morning, the wait

at the security station was light, and they had no trouble getting through quickly.

"So," Richard began, once again taking charge of the operation, "we all know where we need to be and when, so I think I'm gonna go get some breakfast."

"I saw a couple of places on the way," Ellen reminded him. "There was one...I think it was called The 5 Tuns, that looked pretty good, at least what I saw when we passed by. Actually, now that I think about it, I almost think we've been there before. Maybe one of the other times we flew outta here? Anyway, we could try there for breakfast."

"Sounds good," Richard replied. "So, everyone coming?"

He took off back toward the security checkpoint, trying to find where the restaurant Ellen mentioned was. Even though he couldn't remember its location, he didn't want to seem as though he hadn't been paying attention. As they walked, they passed the terminal's Starbucks location.

Hermione, who had been lagging behind for the past few minutes, perked up as she caught a whiff of the coffee coming from inside.

"Come on, Harry!" she exclaimed, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him toward the coffee shop. "We'll just go in here," she announced to the rest of the group as they continued on their way to breakfast. Her declaration was met with shrugs as the pair split off from the rest.

Once they were inside Starbucks, Harry turned to Hermione. "What're we doing in here? I thought we were going to go get breakfast with the rest of them. I'm starved!"

"Oh, I doubt that very much, Harry. Besides, they sell food here too. I just had a craving for coffee, since I didn't get my fix this morning, remember?"

"Yeah," he replied as he eyed the long line. Apparently, Hermione wasn't the only one who had had that idea. Due to the fact that it was early morning and the airport was full of travelers, the Starbucks

line stretched out of the shop itself and down the concourse. "Are you sure you want to wait that long?" he asked.

"Trust me, Harry," she replied easily as she moved to join the line. "You have to try this. Once you take one, you'll be hooked."

"Take one?" he questioned as he joined her. "Are you sure this isn't something illegal?" he joked. "It sounds like you're talking about some illegal drug or something. Don't you mean 'have one'?"

She waved him off. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. But my point still stands."

Harry gave her a skeptical look for a moment, but finally gave in. "Alright, I'm gonna trust you on this. I've never been one for fancy coffee. Just give it to me plain and I'm happy."

"Then obviously you've lived a deprived life, Harry," Hermione goaded lightly. "This is how I make it through the summer, especially the mornings."

This astonished Harry. "How is that possible? You're always so chipper in the mornings at..." he looked around, "school. Too chipper even, especially for that bloody early in the morning. How is summer any different?"

She shrugged in response as they shuffled forward with the line, inching their way closer to the counter. "I just get on a different schedule during the summer. I end up going to bed later and getting up later...or earlier if I have access to one of these," she motioned toward the Starbucks sign.

"I guess I can sympathize," Harry replied. "I get into a different schedule too during the summers. Uncle Vernon always wants me to get up early to get the housework and chores done, so I guess I just get used to it as the summer goes on."

As he finished speaking, the person in front of them reached the counter and began to place his order.

"So what are we getting?" Harry asked. "I have no idea what any of this stuff is. Most of it doesn't even sound like coffee."

"Well, I've never been really adventurous," Hermione began.

"Could've fooled me," Harry muttered.

"But," she continued as she rolled her eyes, "I usually just get a mocha. Minus whip, of course, since it cools the coffee down much too quickly."

She finished speaking just as their turn to order arrived. Harry stepped up to the counter and looked at the menu quizzically. A moment later, his gaze shifted down to the pimply-faced teenager behind the counter.

"Can we get...two mochas minus whip?" Harry asked.

"How big?" the clerk asked in a nasally voice, taking Harry by surprise.

"Grande," Hermione replied for him.

The clerk smirked slightly, but Hermione didn't notice as he continued to input their order into the computer.

"Oh! And get one of those breakfast sandwiches," Hermione chirped. "The one with bacon, egg, and gouda on the ciabatta roll."

"To share? Or..." Harry trailed off uncomfortably. "Make that two then," he added to the cashier.

With another inconspicuous smirk from the employee, Harry paid and he and Hermione turned to leave, but as they did so, they were stopped.

"Did you want me to put your name on this or your girlfriend's?" the clerk asked Harry.

Harry froze, but did not turn around. "You can just put Harry on it," he replied awkwardly as he and Hermione made brief eye contact. He continued walking to the side of the shop and stood against the wall waiting, not making further eye contact with Hermione.

They stood in silence for a few minutes before Harry's name was called. He and Hermione approached the counter and picked up

their cups, as well as a small paper bag for each containing their sandwich. With their purchases in hand, the two made their way to a small, empty table just outside the restaurant proper, and sat down. As they did so, Harry decided that the silence and awkwardness was unwarranted, and that he needed to break the ice.

"So what can I expect from the flight?" he asked. "I've never flown before...well, that's not true actually, but I don't need to remind you about that. I've just never flown on a plane before."

Hermione paused as she lifted her sandwich to her mouth. "Well, there's this big metal tube with wings—"

"Har-har," Harry said sarcastically. "That's not what I meant and you know it." He took a bite from his sandwich as he finished speaking, followed by a drink after swallowing. "This actually isn't half bad," he added. "I taste the chocolate more than the coffee."

"Told you you'd like it," she replied after a drink of her own. "But to answer your question, you have to wear safety belts. Why they don't require those on brooms is beyond me," she muttered the last part under her breath. "I don't know for certain what kind of plane we'll be on this time, so I can't tell you what it'll be like inside. But you will be able to get up to use the lavatory, walk around a bit, and even sit back down."

"Really?" Harry asked with mock astonishment. "I'll be able to sit back down? Well bugger me!"

Hermione snorted at his joke just as he took a drink. Eyes wide with panic, she covered her face and grabbed a napkin to blot her nose. Harry saw this and broke out in laughter.

"Did you just snort coffee?" he asked between laughs. Hermione's red face told him all he needed to know. However, after regaining his wits, he raised his hand diplomatically. "Don't worry though, your secret's safe with me. Until we get back to Hogwarts, that is."

Hermione glared at him and threw her crumpled napkin at him, hitting him softly in the shoulder.

"And you throw like a girl too," he continued.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well of course I do. I am a girl after all. I'd hope you would've noticed that by now."

Harry's head jerked up from his straw, spraying droplets of coffee on the table. Hermione giggled at his lack of coordination. "Trust me, I've noticed," Harry replied quietly as he wiped his face. Hermione, for her part, grabbed another napkin and wiped down the table, cleaning up the remainder of his mess.

"Now we're even," she joked as she set the napkin aside and finished her sandwich. Harry had finished his moments before, but he was still surprised at the speed with which Hermione had eaten hers.

"You really inhaled that thing," he observed.

Hermione snorted once more, this time, however, without coffee to accompany it. "That's such a pleasant image to have," she said.

"Glad I could be of assistance," Harry replied chivalrously as he began to clear the table, picking up the used napkins and putting them into one of the empty paper bags. He grabbed his cup, which was still mostly full of coffee, and went to throw away the trash. He then returned to Hermione and stood beside her as she grabbed her cup and rose. Harry reached out and grabbed her arm, helping her to her feet. "Milady," he said with a smirk.

"Oh, great sir knight," Hermione swooned in an exaggerated fashion, "thank you for thou...okay, that's enough of that," he announced suddenly, laughing. "I can't believe anybody would ever talk that way.

"I thought it was kinda fun," Harry moped. "Gave me a chance to be a gentleman. If we had kept it up, I could have even opened a door for you."

"Oh, Harry, come off it," she replied. "You don't need to talk weird to be a gentleman. I happen to know you already are, and will make someone very happy someday."

Harry looked Hermione curiously, pondering the meaning of her statement. He assumed it could be innocent enough, and he was sure that Sirius would say that it was, but the irrational and teenage part of him couldn't help but read more into her statement. Harry

wasn't sure whether he wanted there to be a deeper, hidden meaning or not, but he couldn't get his mind off of the possibility.

"What?" Hermione asked, startling Harry out of his thoughts. He looked at her to find her staring at him, perplexed. "What're you thinking about?"

He racked his mind for an excuse, however he didn't find one that would work. So he relied on his old standby. "Just thinking," he replied pathetically. Hermione must have picked up on the weakness of his excuse, because she did not press any further. Instead, the two of them began to walk back to their gate, both of Harry's hands full with his cup and computer bag.

They continued to walk to gate F until, a few moments after they had left Starbucks, Hermione stuck her arm out to stop Harry.

"Look!" she exclaimed, pointing ahead.

Harry's eyes tracked Hermione's gesture to one of the many shops that lined the walls. Through the smattering of travelers milling about the concourse, Harry could see a small airport bookshop. Tugging at his arm, Hermione pulled Harry toward the store excitedly.

"Oh, Merlin," Harry muttered as he follows his friend.

Whereas Harry only saw a small shop filled mainly with magazines and paperback books, Hermione found herself in heaven. Releasing Harry's arm, her eyes darted around the shop for something, anything, that she had not yet read.

"Why don't you go look in the back," she suggested oddly, nodding toward the back corner of the shop, "I'm sure they have something more interesting to you back there."

Harry looked at her curiously but took her advice as she turned her attention back to the books, sticking close to the fiction section.

As Hermione continued to browse, occasionally picking up various books to examine them closer, Harry walked through the small nonfiction section on the opposite side of the store, not wanting to get between Hermione and a book. While the store seemed deceptively small, only about ten meters square, it contained an

impressive amount of product. In fact, in the back corner of the shop, Harry found a small bin full of various movies and other videos, all at reduced prices. Looking behind him to see Hermione engrossed by yet another book, this time in the nonfiction section, Harry began to search through the bin, hoping to find something more interesting than books. He had just found one that looked somewhat interesting when he was interrupted by a tap on his shoulder. He turned around to find Hermione standing behind him, a pair of books in her free hand.

"Whatcha got?" Harry asked.

"Oh, I found a book on casino games," Hermione explained. "But I don't know how good it will be, since it was the only one I could find. If they had other books, I could compare them to find out which is the best, but-

"Hermione, this is an airport book store. They can't have twenty of every kind of book known to man."

"I suppose that's true. But look! I found a book that you might like." She held up the other book she was carrying. "I remember reading it when I was younger. It's called Patriot Games," she said as Harry examined the cover, "and if I remember correctly, it's pretty good."

Harry chortled lightly at the book.

"What's so funny?" she asked curiously, looking at the cover again herself to see what was so amusing.

"Nothing," Harry replied. "But I just find it really convenient that, of all the films that a book store should carry, that's it."

"Huh?"

Harry held up the box he had been looking at before Hermione had approached him. "This. It's the movie version of that book, or at least that's what it looks like," he explained.

Hermione looked at the box closely. Sure enough, it was the film version of Patriot Games.

"Really? They made a movie?" she asked. "I only remember the book. Here, lemme see." She took the box from Harry and flipped it over to examine the back. "Ah, that's why," she said after a moment. It came out in 1992. That means this movie is older than we are. No wonder I haven't seen it." She handed the box back to Harry.

"Well, I can think of one very good reason why I haven't seen it," he replied. "And it starts with 'Durs,' and ends with 'leys.' Can you guess what it is?"

"No," she answered snarkily. "But more seriously, I think it would be interesting for you to see what the differences are. I haven't bothered to see any movie adaptations of books, since the books are always better, but from what I hear, movies are always different from the books."

"Or I could just get the movie and not read the book at all," Harry argued with a smile. "It would really cut down on the work."

"Or we could do both," Hermione retorted, putting her hands on her hip in a traditional Hermione pose, with her head tilted and brow slightly furrowed.

Harry studied her for a moment with his head cocked to the side. I never noticed how cute that little pouting pose really looks, he thought. Suddenly, his eyes widened as he shook his head to get that thought out of his mind. Where did that come from? It must be Sirius's innuendos. That's it. It's always Sirius's fault.

"Or we could buy both," Harry replied finally, trying to hide the blush that threatened to creep onto his face. He subtly emphasized the word 'buy,' so that he could have an excuse if he never read the book. He did say that he would buy the book, he never said that he would read it.

"Great!" she said. "Are you ready to go now then? I don't want you to get a chance to change your mind."

"Who are you and what have you done to Hermione?" Harry balked. "The Hermione I know would never willingly leave a bookstore without being dragged out kicking and screaming. Believe me, I know. I've had to do the dragging before."

Hermione slapped him playfully in response.

"Hey!" he cried. "What's with all of the abuse lately? I don't remember saying that Harry should be hit all the time! I think I want out of this abusive relationship!"

Hermione giggled as they reached the counter, and she placed her book on the counter and began to search through her pocket. Harry stepped up beside her and placed his purchases on the counter next to hers as he nudged her out of the way.

"I got this," he said as he pulled out his new wallet.

"No, you got Starbucks. I can pay for my own, Harry."

"I'm sure you can" he replied. "But I need to pay my way on this trip somehow, and trailing behind you paying for everything seems like a good start."

"Prat," she said and stuck out her tongue.

"But you love me anyway."

"No comment," she responded jokingly. "But let me pay. I want this book, so I'll pay." She attempted to give a note to the cashier, who was watching impatiently as the two bickered. Harry put out his arm to block her, stretching it across her chest to keep her from reaching. With his other hand, he handed a note to the cashier. Since it was the first bill in reach, he took it, and gave Harry his change and the purchases in a bag. Harry took it and withdrew his arm from Hermione.

"I'll get you back for that," she huffed.

"I'm sure you will. And I'll be quivering in fear for the rest of my life waiting for it."

"Oi, just you wait, Potter," she growled lightly, eliciting a raised eyebrow from the cashier as they walked away. However, Harry did not see it. "You will be quaking. Just you wait and see. You'll never know where or when I'll strike. Just remember, I'll know where you'll be for the next week. I know where you live. I know where you sleep."

"And yet you haven't taken advantage of that yet. Amazing."

She threw her hands up in the air in an exaggerated show of exasperation. "Gah! How do you keep coming up with these comebacks?"

Harry shrugged. "Remember, I live with Sirius, I talk with him a lot too. So I've learned from the best. Also, bear in mind that for most of the year, I live with a bunch of teenage boys, with their arguing and putdowns. So I've had to adapt."

"Adapt? You make it sound so clinical," she said as they continued to walk toward their gate.

"Well, it was either that or tell you how I've learned that our housemates can be a bunch of sodding wankers who like to go on about who they've snogged and when, or worse. So I've had to come up with some good insults to deal with it."

"That's not really something to brag about, Harry. Do you really want to be known as the person who is the best with insults?"

"Hey!" he said, throwing his arms up in his defense. "I never said I was the best. Just that I've gotten better at it. You think I'm good? You need to bicker with Seamus. He's got me beat hands down. Dean's pretty good too."

Hermione shook her head. "I'll take your word for it. Besides, I'd much rather bicker with you anyway," she added, batting her eyes obviously.

"Are you flirting Hermione?" Harry asked in a playful tone. "Because if you are, you could use some work in making it less obvious. See, girls are supposed to be mysterious and subtle. They're never supposed to make their intentions clear. Batting your eyes like that was a bit...obvious."

Hermione snapped her fingers in dismay. "Oh, bother," she said, causing Harry to chuckle. "And here I was trying to be Miss Mysterious and be alluring. Guess it didn't work, huh?"

Harry didn't make eye contact. "Well, I didn't say it didn't work," he replied. "Only that it could use some work. But hey, what can't use some work, eh?" he added nervously.

"Er, yeah," Hermione responded skeptically. But her skepticism was short-lived, as she spotted yet another shop, this time a small electronic goods store that seemed to sell various travel-related products and accessories. "Harry, that reminds me," she said. "If you're gonna take your computer to the States, you'll need an adapter."

"Huh?" he asked.

"The power outlets in America are different than we have here. You'll be able to charge your computer here, but without an adapter, you'll only be able to use it until the battery dies. We need to get one, and I'm sure they'll have one," she added, gesturing toward the small shop.

"Computer illiterate, remember?" Harry asked as he pointed to himself. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, honestly Harry!" Hermione complained, as she once again dragged him into a shop.

A few minutes later, the pair exited, with yet another small bag to add to their collection of books, a movie, and their still present coffee.

"There, now you'll be thanking me once we get there," Hermione explained proudly.

"Sure, sure, whatever," Harry responded as they rounded the last corner to their gate. As they arrived, they found the others sitting and waiting for them.

"Harry! Hermione!" Sirius yelled, waving at them despite being only about ten meters away.

The pair rolled their eyes as they continued to approach.

"You two were gone a while," Sirius observed caustically. "I hope you didn't get into any trouble."

"Sirius!" Harry barked angrily, glancing at Richard and Ellen nervously.

"What cub?" Sirius asked innocently. "I was just expressing my sincere desire that you two were safe and didn't get into any trouble. That's all."

"I'm sure," Harry growled as he sat down next to Ellen with Hermione on his other side.

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"So now you just choose the password you want," Ellen explained as she pointed at the screen of Harry's computer, which was perched atop his lap. With Hermione on one side and Ellen on the other, Harry had spent the time since he and Hermione had returned to the gate setting up his computer, with help from the two female Grangers.

"How about-"

"Harry, no!" Hermione interrupted. "You don't tell someone your password, that defeats the whole point. Think of it this way: would you tell the Slytherins the password to Gryffindor Tower if they were the ones who asked you to set the new one?"

"No," he replied sheepishly. He looked back down at the keyboard and began to hunt for and type various letters to form his password. "Done," he announced after a moment.

"Now click continue or press 'Enter,'" Ellen instructed as she shot a scathing look at her daughter for telling Harry off. While her tone had not been overtly hostile, and despite the fact that Ellen knew that she was simply looking out for Harry, there could have been a better way to handle the situation.

"Sorry Harry," Hermione apologized after seeing her mother's glare. "I guess I just have the expectation that everyone should know as much about computers as I do. Sorry if I made you feel like dirt."

"It's okay," he replied quietly. "At least I know what dirt feels like now. Now I won't take it for granted quite as much."

"Harry!" Sirius called from across the narrow pathway between seats. "Stop wallowing about. Nobody likes a pity party. Unless there's alcohol of course."

As Harry's screen finally showed his desktop for the first time, his lesson in modern computing was interrupted by a voice over the overhead intercom system.

"Greetings passengers of British Airways flight 2387 to Las Vegas, Nevada. We'd like to begin boarding beginning with first class. We are now accepting passengers flying in first class for boarding and will continue with Club World. Once again, we are now boarding all first class passengers for flight 2387 from London to Las Vegas, Nevada."

"Well, that's our cue," Richard announced, rising from his seat and stretching.

"But I thought we were Club World?" Harry asked.

"We are. But it won't take long to board the firsties," Richard replied. "So we might as well get in line now." He turned to the rest of the group. "Make sure you have your boarding passes ready, since they'll check them as we board."

"Once we're on board, though, it doesn't matter where we sit, as long as we stay in the same seats we bought," Ellen said. "So you can sit with whoever you want. Personally, I can tell you that I'll be sitting with Richard, so that seat is taken."

Harry closed his computer, unplugged it, and packed it all away in his case along with the power adapter he had bought. Zipping it up, he stood.

"I doubt it's fully charged, Harry," Ellen observed. "But I'm sure they'll have outlets on the plane so you can charge it. They won't have Internet access though, since it interferes with the plane itself."

"Doesn't matter," Harry replied, shrugging. "I wouldn't know what to do with it yet anyway. I'll just want 'till we get to Vegas."

Richard and the others, with the exception of Hermione, were already in line, waiting a respectable distance behind the few remaining first class passengers. Harry stepped into line behind Minerva, with Hermione behind him. Ellen stepped next to her husband to wait.

"Have you ever been on a plane before, Minerva?" he asked, trying to make small talk. He couldn't remember talking to his Transfiguration professor that day.

She turned slightly, sporting a contemplative look on her face. After a moment, she replied. "Maybe, Harry. I can't remember. Certainly not in recent memory, but I do have a vague memory of traveling on a muggle plane when I was quite young. My father was a muggle, you know, and if I recall, we used to travel quite regularly."

Harry looked surprised at her revelation. "I didn't know you were a...I didn't know your father was a muggle," he corrected hastily, trying to avoid the term 'halfblood.'

"It's not something I talk about often, Harry. But I figured that it would be appropriate to mention in this case, since we are venturing into the muggle world. Now-"

"Greetings passengers of British Airways flight 2387 to Las Vegas, Nevada," the announcer began once more. "We are now pleased to welcome all Club World passengers to board the aircraft. We will begin boarding from the back of the plane, so please present your boarding passes for verification. Once again, we would like to invite all Club World passengers to begin boarding at this time, beginning at the back of the aircraft. Thank you."

The line began to move once more, and Harry picked up his bag from the floor, where he had put it while talking with Minerva, and slowly moved forward with the rest of the passengers. Of their group, Richard and Ellen boarded first, followed by Sirius, Remus, and finally Minerva. As they left the terminal and entered the jetway, Harry stepped forward and handed his boarding pass to the airline employee.

The attendant at the counter examined Harry's boarding briefly before scanning it and setting it off to the side.

"Have a good flight, sir," she said respectfully and looked beyond Harry to Hermione. Taking this as his cue, Harry stepped forward and into the jetway that he had seen the others enter.

A wave of cold air suddenly hit Harry as he stepped into the jetway, and the sound of jet engines filled his ears as he walked down the long metal corridor. He unconsciously felt himself walking faster than normal as the downward slope of the walkway added to his momentum. As he walked he heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see Hermione coming down the jetway a few meters behind.

Just as she caught up with him, Harry turned the slight corner at the end of the jetway and was greeted by the fuselage of the plane, along with its open door. Looking through the slight crack between the plane and the jetway, Harry stepped over the threshold and into the plane itself, only to find himself waiting in another line.

"Just brilliant," Hermione complained from behind Harry. "I always hate how we go down the long, empty jetway just to run into a bunch of people just inside the door of the plane. How hard can it be to find your seat? It doesn't take that long to look at a number and find a spot for your bag!" While she was irritated, she was purposefully keeping her voice down so as not to incite the other passengers.

Harry decided not to push Hermione's temper any further, so he looked at his boarding pass and changed the subject. "Where are you supposed to sit?" he asked.

"11F," she replied, glancing at her boarding pass.

Minerva, standing in front of Harry, turned at Hermione's voice. "That's a coincidence, Hermione, since I was given 11E. Harry?"

"12D," he grumbled. He peered down the line of passengers to see the seating arrangement. There appeared to be two seats on each side of the plane, facing in opposite directions with privacy screens separating them. Along the center of the plane, there was a row four seats wide. The center two seats looked to be side by side, with an opposite-facing seat on either side. While the two center seats were not separated, the extra seats on the side were separated from the

other two by privacy screens. "Looks like I'll be in one of those side seats with people I don't know," he complained.

Minerva, sensing his disappointment, made a snap decision. "Take my seat, Harry," she offered. "I couldn't care less where I sit, so long as I get to the end of the flight in once piece."

Harry looked unsure of her offer. "Are you sure?" he asked. "I don't want to take your seat away from you. What makes me more deserving than you?"

She gave Harry a patronizing smile, but did not humor his question. "Just do an old woman a favor and take my seat, Harry. I could do with a bit of time alone, especially after spending a year with a school full of children."

Harry looked at her skeptically, not quite buying her reasoning. But he nodded just as the queue began to move forward, allowing Harry and Hermione to get to their seats, which were near the front area of the Club World section.

They walked around the front of the seats and inside what seemed like a small, separate room, complete with walls on either side except the front. There was ample storage space and room for the seats to recline and lengthen to form beds. Harry tucked his computer case under the seat as he and Hermione sat down and fastened their safety belts.

"Better to do it now and get it over with than wait," Hermione rationalized. "Besides, gives us something to do now instead of sitting here waiting."

Harry gave her a questioning look. "Something to do? It took all of half a second."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "True, but now you can't say you haven't accomplished something on the plane so far."

"I'll just chock it up under my list of accomplishments. Let's see here..." he lowered his voice, "defeating a grown mountain troll at age eleven? Check. Killing an evil dark lord? Check twice if you include the situation with the Stone. Killing a massive ancient

mythical snake? Check. Time travel? Check. Becoming the youngest Triwizard champion ever? Check."

"I get the picture, Harry. Remember, I was there for most of those."

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that," he replied, feigning seriousness.

"What? Do you think you managed to stay alive all on your own?"

"Well, I kinda gave Ron all the credit," Harry admitted. "I mean, he did sacrifice himself during the chess game."

"Pfft," she hissed in response. "He was just fine. I almost think he was acting or faking being injured. I mean, how bad can it be to fall five feet from a giant fake horse?"

"I never asked. I just always assumed it was worse than when you risked your life when the basilisk was roaming around the school and ended up petrified."

"Oh, naturally that wasn't as bad," she retorted with a snort.

"You know I'm just joking, right?" Harry asked uncertainly, wanting to make that perfectly clear.

She shook her head, her eyes wide. "No. You were joking?" she asked incredulously.

"Well, yeah. I didn't mean to downplay anything you-"

"Harry."

"Yes?"

"I was joking too."

"Oh."

"Oh? Is that all you have to say? You're not gonna sling some curses at me or anything for having you on?"

"No. Why would I do that? You know I'd never curse at you. Sirius, yes. Ron, maybe, but only in fun. But you, never."

Hermione faked a swoon. "Oh, Harry, that's so sweet," she said.

"I try my best," he replied smartly as he brushed an invisible piece of lint from his sleeve. As he did so, Hermione let out a long yawn, quickly throwing her hand in front of her mouth to cover it. "I didn't realize I was that boring," Harry said with a chuckle.

"You know full well that it's too bloody early in the morning, and my caffeine isn't having its usual effect."

"Maybe you've become tolerant. You'll have to increase the dosage next time," he joked.

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, but was cut off as the plane began to back away from the terminal.

"Ladies and gentlemen, British Airways would like to welcome you to flight 2387 to Las Vegas, Nevada by way of New York City, New York. We will be getting underway shortly, but first we must go over a few safety features of our Boeing 777 aircraft."

Harry listened with rapt attention as the steward covered the various emergency exits as well as other safety features and emergency procedures. He even paid attention when they covered how to fasten the safety belts, despite the fact that his was already fastened. Hermione, for her part, seemed to be tuning out the speech, which surprised Harry, who had never seen her ignore a lecture of any kind.

As the steward finished speaking and sat down, the plane shifted direction and began to move forward. Harry peered to the side to try and get a look out the window, but all he could see were brief glimpses of tarmac and grass. Needless to say, he was disappointed.

"It's not worth looking out the window at this point," Hermione offered, watching Harry. "There's nothing to see."

"But I wanna," Harry pouted, crossing his arms.

"Maybe on the way back, if you're good," Hermione responded in an authoritative tone. "Maybe I'll let you sit by the window if you behave yourself."

"Okay, Mione," he said in a childish voice.

"But if you call me 'Mione' again, I won't let you sit there."

"Why?" Harry asked, his voice normal once more. He looked at Hermione curiously, awaiting her answer.

"Because my name is Hermione, not 'Mione.' Although, I do like that nickname better than any of the others, I don't really think it's appropriate."

As Harry pondered why that name might not be appropriate, rather than the fact that Hermione may simply not like it, his thoughts were interrupted by another announcement.

"Flight attendants prepare for departure," a gravelly voice announced over the plane's speaker system.

"Here's the best part," Hermione told Harry as she gripped her armrests.

Suddenly, the plane lurched forward, accelerating quickly along the runway. As the plane rocketed toward take off, Harry was flung forward in his seat, due to the fact that his seat faced the rear of the plane. Despite the fact that he was straining against his safety belt, Harry had a huge smile plastered on his face. He glanced over Hermione as the plane nosed up, and saw a grin on her face as well. Why she had never enjoyed flying on a broomstick no longer made sense to him.

As the plane leveled out in the air, Harry sat back in his seat once more.

"You may now turn on and use any portable electronic devices," the steward announced. "The captain has also turned off the 'fasten seatbelt' sign, so you may feel free to move about the cabin. Our estimated time of arrival in Las Vegas is 2:55 PM Pacific Standard Time, with an expected flight time of just under sixteen hours."

Harry unbuckled his safety belt and slouched slightly in his seat to get comfortable. Hermione, for her part, rummaged around in her bag and pulled out the book on casino games that Harry had bought in the airport. She then lifted the armrest between herself and Harry and tucked her legs under herself and began to read. Harry looked around the cabin to see others doing the same thing. With a sidelong glance to Hermione, Harry subtly reached under his seat and pulled out the copy of Patriot Games that Hermione had suggested he buy. Trying not to get her attention, Harry opened it and began to read.

Two hours later, after the flight staff had made a pass to check on all of the passengers, Harry closed his book and stretched, earning a satisfying pop from his sternum. He tucked the book back under the seat and slouched off to his side and closed his eyes. That morning, he had woken up earlier than he usually ever did, even when living with the Dursleys, so he was naturally exhausted.

As soon as he had closed his eyes, he heard a rustling from beside him, followed by a long, loud yawn. Ignoring it, Harry attempted to fall asleep, only to be startled by something landing on his shoulder. He cracked open a single eye to see a mass of bushy hair perched atop his shoulder. The body that was attached to the hair was snuggled up against his side as well, trying to fall asleep.

With a contented sigh and smile, Harry laid his head on Hermione's and closed his eye once more before drifting off into a peaceful, comfortable sleep.

End of Chapter 6

A/N: Well, that was a fun chapter for me to write, I can tell you that much. I wanted the entire purpose of this chapter to be to pull Harry and Hermione out of the magical world and into someplace new for Harry. As a result, he may have to rely on Hermione much more from here on out. That said, there are a few hidden points in this chapter that may not be immediately obvious at first glance, but give hints as to the future of this story and the series in general. But that aside, there are a few other points that I wanted to discuss about this chapter:

The first is pretty minor, so I'll deal with it first. I didn't give any specs for the computer Harry received for a few reasons: in order to keep

the story somewhat timely in the future, and in order to not bog the story down in too much useless detail. I put this explanation in because I could just imagine someone out there asking what the specs were. But aside from that, Harry receiving a computer will play a small role in this story, and a much larger one in the next installment in this series.

In addition, I could not find concrete information as to whether British Airways flights include power outlets. While I researched this chapter extensively, going so far as to use the BA web site to plan a flight from London to Vegas, and analyzing Heathrow maps, I could not find adequate evidence to support the assertion that there were outlets on the planes. As a result, I included them in this story. They may be fictitious, or they may not be. But for the purposes of this story, they exist.

Another thing to mention is the short time-frame of this story. When reading it, bear in mind that it takes place, for the most part, over the course of about a week (at least from here on out). So don't expect a fast resolution to the Harry/Hermione relationship. The relationship will progress slowly, but it would not be realistic to expect their behavior toward each other to change overnight. As a result, the awkwardness we see in this chapter will persist, although it will gradually decrease throughout the course of the story. Bear in mind that this awkwardness is new to the pair, as they consider things they've never really considered before. That is the approach I'm taking with this.

Now, onto the last bit of this note:

Chapter Title Hint: This one should be pretty easy. The next chapter revolves around their arrival in Las Vegas, so it should be quite easy to find a Queen song that deals with that topic. I don't really even need to give a hint for this one, honestly.

So anyway, thank you very much to all of you who have read the story so far, and I hope you continue to enjoy it. If you do, please let me know in a review. Also, if there's something that you'd like me to address in a future author's note, or explain in greater detail, please let me know. I'll see you soon with chapter 7.

Chapter 7

Now I'm Here

July 24, 2011

3 PM PST

Harry Potter stretched languidly as he stood from his seat next to Hermione onboard a Boeing 777 plane. After nearly sixteen hours of flight with only a brief stop in New York City to refuel, he had been sitting for a long time. As he reached under his seat to retrieve his bag, Hermione rose from her seat as well and collected her belongings.

The light from the mid-afternoon Las Vegas sun shone through the windows of the plane as passengers began to disembark the plane, only to be greeted by the desert heat. Harry and Hermione, for their part, waited until most of the other passengers had left the plane before leaving their enclosed seats. As they did so, they were greeted by the other members of their party, Richard and Ellen Granger, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Minerva McGonagall, all of whom looked much more tired than they had in London.

"So we're here," Richard said, stating the obvious.

"Yep," Sirius replied, looking through the door of the plane and into the jetway.

The group exited the plane and was immediately greeted by a blast of hot air as the Las Vegas sun roasted the metal walkway.

"Wasn't expecting that," Sirius admitted, shocked at the heat.

"And what, pray tell, were you expecting, Mr. Black?" Minerva asked sarcastically. "What part of traveling to a desert made you think that we would be cold and uncomfortable?"

"I am uncomfortable," Sirius whined. "And nobody ever told me this place was in a desert. Whenever I think of Las Vegas, I think of nice, cool casinos filled with magical, almost erotic noises."

"What kind of twisted world do you live in?" Harry asked. "'Erotic noises?' If that's what you think of when you think about casinos, I'd hate to think of what comes to mind when you hear the term 'gentleman's club.'"

"Where'd you learn that term, Harry?" Sirius asked pointedly, ignoring Harry's inquiry.

"I live with a group of teenage boys most of the year, remember, Sirius?"

"Good point. But you don't need to be thinking about things like that, especially at your age." He looked over at Richard, who was nodding absently in agreement.

The seven exited the jetway and were immediately greeted by an open, circular gate, with a collection of slot machines in the center.

"We must be in Las Vegas," Ellen muttered. "Nowhere else on Earth would you see slot machines in an airport."

"Well, you've got to admit that they've got a theme and they take it as far as possible," Remus commented. "Gotta give 'em credit for that."

"Credit?" Ellen balked. "They don't call this city Sin City for nothing, and this is just proof of it. They want to milk you for everything you're worth from the moment you step off of the plane until the moment you board again."

Remus shrugged, not willing to take the argument any further.

Richard glanced at the clock on the wall to confirm the time. "We'd better get going," he said. "It's getting late, and we still need to get our luggage and get to the hotel to check in. Looks like baggage claim is..." he looked around for a sign, "downstairs. Follow me!" He pointed ahead and charged forward.

"He's got entirely too much energy for being up this long, and for his age," Hermione remarked.

"His age?" Harry asked as they followed her father. "He can't be that old, can he? I mean, he doesn't look much older than forty."

"Spot on, Harry," Ellen interrupted. "But don't let him know that I told you how old he is. He seems to have this belief that he looks younger than he is. We try not to ruin that fantasy."

"I'll keep that in mind," Harry replied.

"You do that, Harry, and you'll do just fine in this family."

Harry looked at her curiously, trying to decipher her statement. Was she trying to say something more? Or was she simply referring to how well he would do on the holiday with the family? Harry couldn't be sure, but he would try to find out during the course of the trip.

Richard pointed out that, according to some directional signs, in order to collect their luggage and exit the airport, they would need to take a short ride on an underground train.

"Looks like it's like the London tube," he said as they waited next to the tracks.

"Well, the only train I've ever been on is the one to and from Hogwarts," Sirius revealed. "So it'll be a new experience for me. Does it go any faster?"

Richard shrugged. "Couldn't tell you. The tube trains are completely different from surface trains, and may go faster, depending on the situation. But in this case, I doubt it."

"Damn," Sirius cursed. "And here I thought I would get my jollies for the day."

"I know for a fact that these good people don't want to see you get your jollies, Padfoot," Remus goaded as they boarded the car.

"Shut it, Moony, or I'll tell everyone about that time with Sarah Washburn where you-"

"One more word..." Remus growled dangerously, causing Sirius to break out in laughter.

"Is there something we need to know, Remus?" Harry pressed with a smile.

"Don't pay this old bag any attention, Harry," Remus replied. "He's just talking outta his arse."

Harry gripped the vertical rail he was holding tightly as the car shuddered slightly as it moved. He jerked slightly as the train moved, but it was only temporary, because a moment later, the tram arrived at its destination on the other side of the airport. They exited the train and followed the signs as they began to climb toward the surface.

Eventually, the wide underground walkway leveled out and opened into an expansive, brightly lit room with high ceilings. The room was full of luggage carousels but, more importantly, it was also full of a large assortment of slot machines.

"And there're slot machines to play while you wait for your luggage too," Ellen complained.

"You'll have to get used to it, dear," Minerva said. "From what I gather, it'll only get worse from here. Just wait until we go into a casino."

While the others waited for the luggage to emerge from the chute onto the carousel, Richard, Harry, and Sirius visited the currency exchange counter in the corner of the room. After Richard and Sirius had converted their British Pounds to dollars, Harry took his turn, deciding to convert all of the money he had brought. What he was handed back shocked him.

"15,900 dollars," he repeated to himself quietly. He had thought that £10000 was a large sum of money, but now his pockets were full of even more. At this point, Harry was beginning to question the necessity of withdrawing so much from his vault. However, he quickly decided that it was better to be safe rather than sorry, and that if he didn't spend it all, he would just deposit it back into his vault when they returned.

After they had collected their luggage from the carousel, and glanced around the room a bit, Richard led the way toward the large glass doors on the far end of the makeshift casino. Once outside, they were greeted by a massive fleet of vans, taxis, limousines, buses, and other forms of transportation.

"We didn't rent a car," Richard began, "since we didn't really plan on driving anywhere while we're here. From what I read on the Internet, the great thing about the Strip is that everything is pretty close together. For the most part, you can walk wherever you want to go. So all we need to do is take a shuttle to the hotel and we'll be set."

"I did want to mention one thing," Ellen added. "We are in a foreign country. We all know that. But Richard and I thought it would be best if we used some kind of buddy system. As pathetic as that sounds, it's better to be safe than sorry. So I think it would be best if Richard and I were together, and Harry and Hermione were together. Sirius, Remus, Minerva, since you're all adults, I'm not gonna tell you that you need to pair up. You can if you want, and I think it would be best, but you can choose for yourself."

Hermione raised her hand while her mother was speaking, waiting her turn.

"Hermione, I don't think you need to raise your hand," Harry pointed out. "This isn't school. I think it would okay for your to speak out of turn."

Ellen saw this and cracked a smile, before letting her daughter speak.

"Are these gonna be the room arrangements too?" Hermione asked.

"Maybe," Ellen replied.

"Absolutely not!" Richard answered at the exact same moment.

Ellen shot a glare at Richard, and found herself surprised when he did not cower. Hermione made it a point to step away from her parents.

"I've just opened up a major can of awkward," she explained to Harry quietly as she put distance between herself and Richard and Ellen.

"Is this where I conveniently disappear?" Harry asked lightly. "Would that be helpful?"

"No," she replied with a shake of her head. "You didn't do anything wrong. So, before you start, don't even think about apologizing and blaming yourself."

As she finished speaking, their shuttle arrived. Upon seeing it for the first time, Harry had to do a double-take. He had unconsciously set his expectations too high. When he was greeted by a simple white van that appeared to be several years old, he was somewhat perplexed.

"Something wrong?" Hermione asked as they boarded the shuttle. The inside was fitted with three rows of seats, in addition to the front pair. Richard and Ellen sat in the far back, while Minerva, Remus, and Sirius sat in the middle row. As they were the last to board since Hermione had walked away from her parents, she and Harry had the front row to themselves.

"I guess I was just expecting something more. Maybe a stretch limousine or something like that. This is Vegas after all."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Harry. Why would we rent a limousine for a ride that's only gonna last a few minutes? We're just going to the hotel, not rolling up to the high-roller room at a casino or something."

"Well, a bloke can dream, can't he?"

Suddenly, Hermione's eyes widened as she pressed her face against the window. "Look!" she exclaimed, pointing.

"What is it?" Harry asked, not understanding what she was pointing to.

"That advertisement! They're playing Phantom of the Opera at The Venetian!"

Harry squinted and was able to make out the advertisement atop a passing taxi that advertised for the show. "No, that just says 'Phantom,'" he replied.

"Same thing," she responded, her excitement not waning. "Mum, dad, can we go see it?"

"We'll see. It depends on if we have time," Ellen replied curtly, her attention elsewhere.

"What's so exciting about an opera?" Sirius asked from the row behind Harry and Hermione.

"Oh, it's only one of the most famous shows of all time," Hermione said, as though it were the most obvious statement in the world. "But I've never been to see it. Now I might finally get the chance!"

Meanwhile, in the backseat, Richard and Ellen were engaged in a conversation of their own.

"They are not staying in the same room!" Richard hissed, purposefully trying to keep his voice down.

"Why?" Ellen asked firmly.

"Do I need to spell it out? There's a reason we didn't let them stay in the same room back at that rancid house without keeping the door open. Just think about what would happen if the door was closed and they had a room of their own. Not to mention in a room that probably only has one bed."

"And?" she pressed. "Do you really think that they'll take advantage of that? Shall I list the reasons why that's total crap?"

"Humor me."

"Let's see. First, they're not together. They're not a couple, and I highly doubt that they'll act like it when they're alone. Second, we let them stay with each other on the other side of the country for nine months out of the year. And to my knowledge, your daughter's virtue is perfectly intact."

"But they're getting older, and you yourself said that if they aren't a couple now, they soon will be. That's what I'm afraid of."

"Then we'll deal with that when we get there. But you know just as well as I do that he's the best friend that Hermione's ever had. She didn't have many friends before Hogwarts, and I realize now that we only made that worse by encouraging her to do well in her studies.

She's gotta break out of her comfort zone sometime. Like it or not, I really think we need to give her that opportunity."

"It's not Hermione I'm worried about," Richard grumbled.

"Oh, come off the overprotective father routine. It's not very becoming of you, Richard. Do you really think Harry's gonna take advantage of the situation if we let them room together? If they ever do get together, it will only be because Hermione dragged him kicking and screaming. So the question is, do you trust your daughter?"

Richard didn't answer, but instead looked out the window as the shuttle turned onto the Strip. The shuttle changed lanes, passing a large replica of the Eiffel Tower, which served as the entrance to the Paris resort.

"Besides," Ellen continued, sensing that her husband was not going to respond, "if Hermione is trying to pursue Harry, then we owe it to her to help however we can. And this is one way we can do that. Besides, she's mature enough to know how far she can go...not that I think it will get to that point, at least while we're here."

"You seem to have more faith in the boy than I do. I mean, I like him fine, I just know what teenage boys are like at that age. Remember, I was one at one point. I know what goes through their mind more than anything else." Ellen opened her mouth to protest. "But," Richard continued, "if you think we should trust them, then who am I to argue? I will tell you this though, if he so much as touches her or does anything I don't like-"

"Yes, yes, I get the picture," Ellen interrupted. "And since you saw my point," she added, leaning over to peck him on the cheek, "you won't be sleeping on the couch tonight. And since it's a hotel room, I don't think the couch would be very comfortable anyway. Granted, they usually do turn into a bed, which just helps my case when it comes to their rooming arrangements."

Richard crossed his arms and glowered angrily out the window as he watched the iconic buildings of the Las Vegas Strip continue to pass. With a final turn to the left, the shuttle pulled up in front of the MGM Grand resort, a massive green building that looked to be made out of pure emerald.

As the shuttle stopped, Hermione opened the door and jumped out, followed by Harry and the rest. Once Richard had exited the van, he walked to the driver's window and paid him, while the others began to unload their luggage from the back.

"I didn't know we were going to the Emerald City," Hermione remarked. "I wonder what room the wizard's in?"

"Huh?" Harry asked.

"Wizard of Oz," she replied. "Don't tell me you haven't seen it."

"I can count the number of films I've seen on one hand. And I don't think a movie with that name would have been near the top of my list growing up. Uncle Vernon didn't much care for the word 'wizard.'"

"Oh," Hermione responded, mentally berating herself for not considering that fact. "I'll just have to add it to the list of things I need to introduce you to then."

Just as she finished speaking, Hermione noticed that the rest of the group had gone on ahead and entered the building, leaving Harry and her behind. The shuttle was still waiting for them to leave before departing. The two rushed through the massive gold-colored doors and into an expansive rotunda, with one wall completely covered by a large check-in counter. The rest of the group was just inside waiting for them expectantly.

"About time, you two," Richard commented. "We couldn't go on ahead, since we aren't staying in this hotel, and we didn't want you to get lost."

"We aren't staying here?" Hermione asked. "Then why did we stop here?"

"Well, we are staying here, but we aren't staying here," her father replied cryptically.

"Well that explains everything."

"No, we're staying at the MGM Grand resort, but in a separate hotel on the property, The Signature. You might've seen the white and

gold towers behind this building? Those are it. We just need to find a way to get back to them so we can check in."

Richard led the way out of the lobby and onto the adjacent casino floor, intent on finding his way to their hotel without asking for assistance. As soon as they stepped into the casino though, he was taken aback.

"Damn," he muttered as he looked around. The MGM casino was absolutely massive, stretching in every direction, with wide swaths of gambling space extending like large hallways in front of them as well as to their right. His face lit up as he saw an overhead sign indicating the direction to the poker room, but his attention was drawn away by an elbow from his wife.

"How about using those signs to find our way to the hotel instead of to the nearest poker table?" she suggested.

Sirius and Remus snickered but were quickly quieted by a glare from Minerva.

"Sorry Minnie," Sirius apologized, addressing the transfiguration mistress by her least favorite moniker.

"Mr. Black," she retorted, silky venom dripping from her voice, "I believe I told you, in your first year no less, to never address me by that horrid name. I also believe I have reminded you at least once every year since then. However, let me repeat myself one more time. Do not call me by that name, lest I reveal what really happened on November 28, 1990."

Sirius paled as he gulped audibly at her threat. "Yes...ma'am."

"Much better. Now, I believe we were searching for this hotel of ours?" she offered. "I do believe that I saw a sign that said that The Signature was in that direction." She pointed past the high-limit slot room, deeper into the casino. "Maybe we should check it out?"

Richard, eager to save face after not being able to find their hotel, quickly took Minerva's advice and led the group through the casino. As they turned a corner just after the high-limit slot room, they were faced with a long, wide sloped hallway, reminiscent of an indoor shopping mall. Walking down it, following the signs, they passed

restaurants, shops, and meeting halls. At one point, they even passed a small wedding chapel.

"Bear in mind where we are," Ellen remarked, seeing the look of astonishment on Harry's face. Obviously he had not been expecting that.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"This place isn't called Sin City for nothing. The city sells itself as being an entertainment center, as well as a place to do things you couldn't do anywhere else. Getting married whenever you want is one of those things. Wedding chapels have become synonymous with Las Vegas, and so have divorces the next day...at least in celebrity culture that is."

"Oh," Harry replied dumbly. "What's the point though? Couldn't you just elope or go to the county courthouse to get married? Why travel all the way here just to tie the knot?"

Ellen shook her head. She had tried to be subtle, but it had obviously not worked. "That's not what I mean, Harry. Let's put it this way: many times when people come to Las Vegas, they meet someone and instantly fall in love. Or so they think. Then, after one night of passion and intrigue, they get married. As soon as they are sober though, many of them dissolve the marriage. These wedding chapels are here to cater to those needs."

Harry didn't reply as they continued to walk, eventually reaching a large staircase that went down to the pool. However, according to various signage, the group would need to travel through a small single glass door near the stairs in order to get to their hotel.

"Seems like it's a bit out of the way," Richard commented.

"Maybe that's the point," Remus suggested. "To make it seem more exclusive."

The entered the door to find a long hallway, complete with moving sidewalks commonly found in airports. Harry, who had not used one in either Heathrow Airport or Mccarran Airport in Las Vegas, jumped on the belt eagerly and began to walk normally. His increased speed meant he reached the end of the glass hallway before the others.

"What're you lot waiting for?" he called obnoxiously. "That thing's there for a reason!"

"I think he's a bit excited to be here," Hermione said to nobody in particular. "I don't have the heart to bring him down from his high."

"I do," Sirius replied. "Oi, Harry," he shouted, "you do realize you're acting out because of a moving sidewalk, right? You realize how pathetic that is?"

"Yep!" Harry yelled back, this time at a slightly quieter volume as the group approached. "But it's fun!"

"And you do realize that you're almost sixteen years old, but you're acting like a five year old?"

"Yep!"

"Where did this come from?" Sirius asked the others quietly. "It just came out of nowhere."

Hermione shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe he's just trying to unwind or something. He's always so serious; maybe this is his way of relaxing or playing around."

"Or," Sirius suggested, "he could be trying to show off in a juvenile way."

"Why would he be showing off?" Hermione asked.

Richard turned his head to glare at Sirius warningly.

"I couldn't tell you for sure," Sirius lied, heeding Richard's warning. "But it looks like plain 'ol showing off to me."

The group met up with Harry at the end of the hallway, only to find that the hallway turned and another hall lay just around the corner, similar to the first. As Harry saw another moving walkway, his eyes brightened once more and he made a move toward it. However, he was stopped by a hand grabbing the back of his baggy t-shirt. He turned to find Hermione holding him back.

"Not making the best impression, Harry," she warned.

At her warning, Harry instantly calmed down. "Sorry," he apologized sheepishly. "Just got a bit excited."

Hermione smiled reassuringly. "That's alright, Harry. Just keep that in mind before you go and do something...spontaneous."

"Right."

After traversing this second hallway, the group found themselves at an intersection, with a path splitting off to their right, while the hallway continued on in front. Looking at the directional signs, they found that they had entered Tower One.

"This is where we get off," Richard announced, turning and walking down the new path. This hall was quite short, and led to a small, tastefully decorated lobby with a single reception desk on one side. Richard approached it and began to converse with the employee behind the counter.

A few moments later, he returned to the group, with a few pieces of paperwork and a set of envelopes and keys.

"So, we've got four rooms," he informed the others. "All of them are in Tower One, since I asked for it, figuring it would be a shorter walk. The other two towers are farther down that hallway we were in. They're also all pretty much next to each other, which will be..." he glanced over at his wife, "convenient. Now, Ellen and I will be together, obviously. Sirius and Remus, I'm not sure about your personal...situation, but I'm assuming that you'll want to room together."

"Hey!" Sirius exclaimed. "I'm not a poofter! And, at least to my knowledge, Remus here isn't either."

Richard shrugged, but pressed on. "As for the others-"

"Minerva can have her own room," Ellen interjected, giving the older woman a knowing smile. "I just think it would be most appropriate. So that just leaves-"

"Us," Harry said uncertainly, glancing at Hermione nervously. She, however, picked up on his nervousness.

"If you aren't okay with that, Harry, then I'm sure we can figure something else out," she said uncertainly as the group made their way toward the elevators.

"No!" Harry exclaimed, but quickly calmed. "No, it's alright. I just...wasn't sure how you felt about the whole situation. But I'm okay with it if you are. How bad could it be anyway? We live together for most of the year, so it'll be just like old times."

"Old times?" she repeated as they boarded an elevator for the eighth floor. "You make it sound like we've been out of school for years and haven't seen each other since."

"You know what I mean. It'll be great."

July 24, 2011

4:37 PM

Harry inserted the keycard into the lock on his and Hermione's room and waited for the audible click accompanying the green light on the lock. As he heard it, he glanced around himself to see Sirius and Remus entering their room next door, and Richard and Ellen entering theirs directly across the hall from his and Hermione's. Minerva was next door to the elder Grangers.

Opening the door, Harry dragged his suitcase into the room and held the door open for Hermione to do the same. The pair set their luggage just inside the door and let it close before looking around their home for the duration of their holiday.

The room was tastefully decorated in neutral tones with indistinct furniture, with the exception of the large wooden armoire that held a flat-screen television. The glass cabinets on either side of the television, as well as the doors underneath were empty, waiting to be filled. An inoffensive sofa rested across from the television, separated by a small coffee table. In total, this pseudo-sitting room was about three meters wide, making it just wide enough to seat several people comfortably. A small kitchenette could be found just inside the door, attached to the sitting room, complete with a bar and

full cooking facilities. A door to a restroom could also be found in this room.

Directly adjacent to the restroom door was another door, this time into the bedroom. Harry and Hermione went through this door together, and stopped short at the sight before them.

"Only one bed," Harry muttered.

"Well, that could be awkward," Hermione replied. "We could just-"

"I can sleep on the sofa," Harry offered.

"No, I don't want you to have to do that, Harry. We can figure something out," she offered hesitantly.

"But you know full well it'll be uncomfortable," he reasoned. "Even though the bed is pretty big, it'll just be awkward. I'm sure the sofa can turn into a bed anyway."

"If you're sure..."

"Honestly, Hermione, I'm sure your dad isn't too thrilled about the rooming arrangement, and I don't really want him staring daggers at me during the entire trip, wondering if I'm sleeping with his daughter." His face reddened as he realized the implications of what he had just said. "In the same bed, that is," he added.

"Right," she said quickly, turning away. "Um, should we start unpacking then? Might as well get it done now instead of waiting. I can never be like daddy; he always leaves his stuff in his suitcase or luggage during the entire trip, never unpacking. He just pulls new clothes out of the bag every day. Just wait. His clothes will be completely wrinkled tomorrow."

"I'll keep an eye out for it," he replied as he quickly exited the bedroom to retrieve his suitcase, in order to avoid further awkwardness. He carried it over and placed it on the sofa and began to empty it into some of the drawers in the armoire. He began by pulling out his cousin's former t-shirts, some of which were large enough to hang down to Harry's knees. These, he folded and tucked away in one drawer before returning to his bag.

"Harry?" Hermione asked uncertainly from behind him. He turned to see her dressed in short khaki shorts and a pink tank, playing awkwardly with her hair as she stood uncertainly. "What's happening with us?"

Harry almost dropped the pair of jeans he was holding due to shock from her question. "What do you mean?" he asked nervously.

"In there," she replied, gesturing to the bedroom, "and lately, things have just been a bit off between us. I know I've used it already today, but the word 'awkward' describes it best. Why?"

Under the guise of looking through his bag, Harry avoided eye contact as he responded. "I dunno," he said simply. "But I do see what you mean. I just think part of it is Sirius joking with us, combined with your father watching my every move like a hawk. I don't really think they think a boy and a girl can be best friends and nothing more, especially at our age."

Hermione looked at him strangely. "Is that what I am to you?" she asked. "Just a friend?"

Why is she making this so bloody difficult? he mused. She's asking questions that I haven't even been able to answer myself, let alone to her. I haven't even figured things out yet, especially after that blasted kiss. I've gotta be careful with this one.

He gave her a small smile as he shook his head in response and chose his words carefully. "Hermione," he began, "you aren't just anything. I can honestly say that you are my best friend."

Hermione gave an imperceptible nod as her attention wandered to the clothes Harry had scattered about the room in an attempt to sort them. "Jeans, Harry?" she asked quietly, changing the topic. "And tees? Is that all you brought?"

He shrugged. "Unless you want to sort through my underwear, then yeah," he joked, trying to bring a semblance of normalcy back into their conversation. True, they had been joking about comfortably over the course of the summer so far, but the summer had also been peppered with uncomfortable and awkward moments. Harry had to admit that Hermione was correct at least in that respect.

"I think I'll save that for another time, Harry," she retorted. "But that's not what I was talking about. I was just looking at the thermometer in the other room. Using the wonky temperature system they use here, it's almost 110 degrees outside. You can't expect to wear jeans in this weather!"

"I always have at home during the summer," he argued.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Harry, this isn't Britain. It's a lot hotter here, and you will die in this heat wearing those clothes!"

"I've survived worse," he said as he winked. "Besides, they're baggy, so I'll be able to get good airflow."

"Not good enough," she maintained stubbornly.

"Okay..." Harry replied slowly and uncertainly. "So what do you want me to do about it?"

"Come with me," she ordered. She turned swiftly and moved toward the door. Harry followed closely behind as she wrenched the door open and crossed the hall.

"What're you doing?" he asked as she knocked on the door.

"Solving a problem," she replied curtly as the door opened revealing Ellen Granger.

"What's up you two?" she asked, inviting the pair inside.

"Mum, I need your help," Hermione announced as Harry took a seat on their sofa, which was placed identically to his and Hermione's room, except mirrored. In fact, the entire room seemed to be a mirror image of the teens'.

"With?" Ellen asked.

"Harry doesn't have any clothes!" Hermione responded emphatically.

Harry raised his hand in his own defense. "I beg to differ," he said, gesturing to the clothes he was wearing. But Hermione waved him off.

"Harry's got this bogus idea that he'll be able to wander around Las Vegas wearing hand-me-down jeans and oversized t-shirts. No shorts, sandals, nothing made for summer. That's just a load of—"

"I think I get the idea, Hermione," Ellen interrupted.

"What idea?" Richard asked as he walked into the room, drying his hair with a towel. He had apparently either just showered or cleaned himself up after the flight.

"Your daughter thinks that Harry needs some new clothes. I can certainly see where she is coming from...no offense though, Harry."

"I'm not quite sure how to take that," he mumbled.

"Mum..." Hermione began, whining.

"I get the picture, Hermione. Lemme just get something on my feet and I'll go with you two."

"Go?" Harry asked, confused. "Go where?"

"Why shopping of course!" Ellen said excitedly.

"Now? As in, right now?"

"Well, yeah," Hermione offered, as if it was the most obvious point in the world. "When else would we go?"

Harry looked to Richard for assistance, but received none. "Don't look at me, kid. You'll have to get yourself out of this mess on your own."

Harry glared at Richard, who laughed in response. "Lot of help you are," Harry growled.

"What do you expect me to do, Harry?" Richard asked. "Save you from the ravenous horde of a teenage girl and her mother? All they want to do is take you on a friendly shopping trip for clothes. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Would you like me to let you know once we get back?" Harry asked as he moved toward the door. Ellen had put on a pair of shoes and

had indicated that she was ready to leave. Harry was taken aback that she was so willing to drop everything just to go shopping for clothes for him. It could not bode well for him.

"Sure thing," Richard replied as he sat down on the sofa and threw his feet up onto the table. He picked up the remote control and began to search the television for something to watch.

"Come on, Harry," Hermione urged, opening the door.

"I think we should visit Sirius and Remus to let them know where we're going," Ellen suggested, causing Harry to groan. He just wanted to get the trip over with, since he couldn't imagine a clothes shopping trip with two females going well for him.

Ellen shook her head in exasperation as she knocked on Sirius's and Remus's door. Remus answered the door a moment later.

"I'm assuming you're looking for Sirius?" he assumed.

Ellen was taken aback. "What makes you say that?" she asked.

"Well, since I assume you brought me along to babysit him, it makes sense that you would come to visit him instead of me." Remus stuck his lip out in a pout as he finished speaking.

"Oh, come off it, Remus," Harry chided. "You know full well we asked you to come along because we thought you'd be a good fit. That, and to keep an eye on Sirius."

"I know," Remus replied. "I was just funning with you."

"Now, can we talk to Sirius?" Hermione asked.

"I might've known," Remus moaned. He stepped aside, opening the door wider to allow the trio into the room. "Padfoot!" he yelled once he closed the door. "Take off the dress, we've got company!"

Harry snickered as Sirius poked his head into the sitting room from the bedroom. "Shut the hell up, Moony," he growled as he opened the door and stepped out. "Now, what could two lovely ladies and one ugly godson want with my services?"

"How often did you have to stroke your ego to get it to be this big?" Harry asked sarcastically.

Sirius shrugged. "Well, I had thirteen years alone in Azkaban, Harry, so I had plenty of time. Now, what's up?"

"We're gonna take Harry shopping for clothes," Hermione announced, indicating to both herself and her mother. "He seems to think his cousin's hand-me-downs will work here in Vegas."

Sirius's look saddened as he glanced at Harry apologetically. "Sorry we didn't get you any clothes over the summer, cub," he said. "I guess I didn't really think about it. And now you're about to be punished for my mistake," he muttered at the end.

Harry chuckled in response. "Don't worry about it, Sirius. It's not like I went to you complaining about my clothes, is it? Besides, I didn't really need any special clothes back home anyway."

Sirius reached into his pocket. "Here, at least let me make it up to you," he said as he pulled out a wad of bills. He peeled off several and handed them to Harry. "Take a some money so you don't have to pay out of your own pocket."

Harry counted the bills and found that there were twenty hundred dollar bills. "Some' money?" he balked as he tucked the bills into his pocket. "Sirius, there's two thousand dollars in here. How much did you actually bring?"

Shaking his head, Sirius responded. "Now, Harry, you know better than to ask someone how much money they have. But I brought 10,000 galleons, or about \$159,000," he finished casually.

Ellen and Hermione's jaws dropped at that amount, which caused Sirius to shrug. "Figured I better put the family money use sometime," he continued. "Worst case scenario, like Harry here, I just don't spend it all and we go home with a wad of money. But I thought I might as well bring enough to make this a real holiday. Now go on, get going, Harry, before it gets too late."

Harry glanced at the clock to see that it was approaching five o'clock in the afternoon. "Yeah," he said, "it'd be a real shame if we had to

end our trip early because it got too late." He feigned disappointment at this possibility.

"Then we better get moving," Hermione observed. "We've got a lot of shopping to do, right mum? We've gotta get a whole new wardrobe and everything. I refuse to let Harry wear those rags anymore."

"Hey!" he cried. "Those're my clothes! Just because they're old and were my cousin's doesn't mean—"

"Oh, sorry Harry," Hermione apologized. "I didn't think about that. I just figured you'd rather have newer clothes that actually fit you instead of whatever those dreadful people threw at you."

"Yeah," he replied simply, opening the door into the hall once more. Once the trio was in the hall, they made their way to the elevators and took them down to the first floor of the tower. Retracing their steps from earlier in the afternoon, they soon found themselves on the casino floor of the MGM Grand.

"Do you have any idea where we're going?" Harry asked. "I mean, where are we gonna get all kinds of different clothes here? You'd have to find a place with several different shops."

"Actually, Harry," Ellen began, "now that you mention it, Richard and I were looking over a map of the Strip that was on the counter in our room. I think I saw a mall farther down the street that should have some shops we can go to."

"How far down the street?" he asked cautiously.

Ellen shrugged slightly as they exited the resort into the sweltering outdoors. "I'm not sure. It looked like it was in that direction," she pointed down the street past the Paris resort. "I think it was near the Treasure Island hotel. I guess we'll find out when we get down there, won't we?"

The three set off in that direction, staying on the same side of the street as the MGM. Hermione and Ellen, having travelled to London many times before, were not out of their element on the crowded sidewalks of Las Vegas. However, due to the fact that he had rarely spent time in London, Harry was struggling to keep up as they

traveled against the stream of people. At times, Hermione and Ellen would leave his sight, but those instances were rare and, for the most part, Harry was able to stay right next to them.

As he crossed the street and reached the gambling hall known as Casino Royale, Harry noticed that his surroundings seemed to change. Gone was the glitz and glamour of the large resorts, and it seemed as though he had stepped into a seedier part of town, dominated by small gambling halls and out of the way shops. In the distance, and also across the street, he could still make out large Las Vegas landmarks, including The Bellagio and Caesar's Palace, but for now, the atmosphere was markedly different.

Part of the reason their surroundings seemed so different, Harry reasoned, was due to the type of people who were crowding this area of the sidewalk. Ellen and Hermione seemed to be consciously sticking closer to Harry and moving more closely together in general. This was due to the fact the sidewalk seemed to be filled with what Harry had derogatorily named 'street peddlers'. However, it was what they were peddling that was the problem. As the trio passed by, each of the men, dressed in large pink and white t-shirts, would smack a deck of cards against their palm before offering one to each passerby. While initially tempted to take one, Harry quickly saw that the ground was littered with them, and realized it would be best if he declined. The cards were actually fliers with images for prostitutes.

Moving quickly away from this area of the Strip, Harry, Hermione, and Ellen crossed to the other side of the street at the intersection between The Bellagio and Caesar's Palace. Finally free from the peddlers, Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now I think I know why they call this 'Sin City,'" he said as they walked past the massive Roman-themed resort.

"Oh, I think that's only the tip of the iceberg, Harry," Ellen replied. "Prostitution isn't legal in Las Vegas. It's just that these people claim to be working for an 'escort' service, and are providing 'entertainment.' It doesn't help matters any that the police aren't always cracking down on it. That's why they're able to get away with that. Just don't make eye contact and keep moving, and you'll be alright."

"I'll keep that in mind as often as I come down this far," he joked.

"You never know, Harry," Ellen retorted. "We're here for a week, so we might find ourselves walking down here again. Ah, it looks like that might be it."

Her announcement drew Harry and Hermione's attention ahead, toward what appeared to be a large outdoor plaza with a covering that appeared to be a crashed spaceship supported by pillars. A massive display screen announced the name of the shopping center, The Fashion Show Mall, as well as various shows and shops, while advertising for specific products as well. But they paid little attention to the sign once they saw the name of the mall. Beyond that, it was of little consequence.

"They don't do anything small here, do they?" Hermione asked.

"It's part of the city. Everything has to be a destination," her mother explained.

They entered the large building, only to find that it appeared much larger on the inside than on the outside.

"So where do you want to start, Harry?" Ellen asked.

"You're asking me?" he asked in response. "I have no idea where to begin." He looked at Hermione. "It was your idea to come here," he added, "so where do you think we should go first?"

Hermione placed her hands on her hips. "Well excuse me for caring about your appearance!" she exclaimed playfully. "I was just trying to help."

Harry looked at her skeptically, maintaining eye contact as an intimidation technique. Finally, Hermione cracked under the pressure.

"Ugh, I can't win with you, can I?" she asked. "Fine then, I think we should start with some casual clothes. Formal clothes can come later."

"Formal clothes?" Harry questioned as Hermione examined the mall map which was stationed near the door. "Why would I need formal clothes?"

"You never know..." she trailed off as she weighed the various shopping options she was presented with. "We might need to go out to a nice dinner while we're here or something like that."

Harry groaned audibly, causing Ellen to chuckle. "So where to then, Hermione?" she asked.

"Abercrombie," she replied simply, taking a final look at the map. "From what we've got to choose from, that'll probably be the cheapest while being somewhat...modern looking."

"Does that mean I'll walk out of there wearing nothing but chrome then?" Harry mocked. "After all, that would be modern."

"Oh, shut it Harry and get moving."

"Yes, ma'am," he mocked as he followed her toward where the map indicated their destination was.

Forty five minutes later found Harry emerging from a changing room to an audience consisting of Hermione and Ellen. He was sporting a new pair of blue and white plaid shorts and a gray polo shirt. Almost from the moment he had stepped into the store, Hermione and Ellen had been thrusting various articles of clothing at him, suggesting he try them on, while going back to retrieve more garments as he changed. It had become very tiresome very quickly. As he stepped out of the changing room this time, he gave a quick spin to give the mother and daughter pair a look in order to gauge their approval.

"I like the shorts," Hermione commented. "But the shirt..." she trailed off as she bit her bottom lip in contemplation.

"I could take it off," Harry suggested, "and look like that model on the wall over there." He gestured toward the large poster right behind Hermione of a shirtless male model. "Just a second." Harry started to withdraw his arms into the shirt as Hermione's eyes bugged out.

"Harry, don't play with her," Ellen ordered lightly. "This is neither the time nor the place for that. How about the other shirts?"

Harry shrugged. "I liked this one the best," he replied. "The blue one just seemed odd, and the red one I just didn't like. This one was really my favorite."

"I liked the green one," Hermione offered, her face no longer flushed. "It plays off your eyes really well."

"It all comes down to what you want, Harry," Ellen said. "You're the one who'll have to live with these clothes."

Harry glanced down at the pile of clothes he had chosen so far, including two other pairs of shorts, two pairs of jeans that finally fit, a series of different tees, a couple of button-down plaid shirts, and two pairs of sandals. There were even several pairs of boxers, much to Harry's chagrin.

"I think I'll go with the green one," he decided finally, eyeing Hermione carefully. Ellen smiled slightly, but hid it well, as Hermione brightened.

"Great choice, Harry!" she said happily. "Is there anything else you wanted here?"

Harry's eyes widened in panic as his mind drifted to an image of himself as a giant dress-up doll for Hermione and Ellen. Even though he had only been in the store for less than an hour, he was already eager to leave and be done with the entire shopping trip.

"Nope," he replied quickly, reaching down to retrieve his pile of clothes. Without sparing a second glance to Hermione or her mother, Harry rushed to the checkout counter and placed his intended purchases before the employee. A few minutes and four hundred dollars later, Harry carried two large paper bags out of the store.

"Now, time for formal clothes," Hermione announced, and was quickly greeted by a loud groan from Harry. "Oh come on, Harry, was it really that bad back there?"

"Yes!" he replied instantly.

"It took less than an hour. We just need to make one more stop and we'll be done."

"Yeah, but how long will that one stop take?"

"Well, the faster we get there, the faster we'll be done," she pointed out.

Harry must have agreed with her point, because he took off in a random direction away from the other two.

"Where're you going, Harry?" Ellen asked, stifling a chuckle.

Harry skidded to a stop, realizing that he had no idea what store they were going to next, or what direction it lay in. "I...don't know," he admitted sheepishly.

"Try Nordstrom, Harry," Hermione suggested, nodding her head toward the large store at the end of the long mall.

"Err...yeah," he replied, turning completely around to return to the other two and head toward the store in question. It took a few minutes to reach the store and the men's department within it, but once they were inside, Harry had absolutely no idea why he was there.

"Um...what am I looking for?" he asked as he looked around the store at the various articles of men's clothing.

"Whatever you want," Ellen replied simply. "What do you want?"

"I dunno. I thought it was Hermione's idea to come here in the first place?"

"Yeah," Hermione defended herself, "you need formal clothes. Sort of like your Hogwarts uniform, but no robes, and just more...formal in general. So we should start with slacks and move up from there. Maybe a few dress shirts. At least one full suit..." she trailed off as voice quieted and her musings continued. Harry rolled his eyes in response as Hermione continued to make suggestions.

She quickly found two pairs of dress slacks, one black and one gray, before ushering Harry into a fitting room. He emerged several minutes later with both pairs in his arms.

"Well?" Hermione asked impatiently, tapping her foot.

"I like the black ones best."

"In this heat, Harry?" she questioned. "You'll kill yourself in black."

"But am I only going to wear them here?" he argued. "What about when we get back home? I need something that will work in both places."

"He's right you know, Hermione," Ellen interjected. "Hermione, you can't be so controlling about everything. It's his choice, remember. You can make suggestions, but don't try to make the decisions for him." She lowered her voice as she whispered to her daughter. "That comes across as overbearing, and nobody likes overbearing." Hermione blushed slightly but nodded.

"Wait," Harry said suddenly. "Where did the bags go?" He had just noticed that the Abercrombie bags had disappeared and were nowhere to be found.

"They're in my pocket," Hermione answered.

"Um...okay," Harry replied uncertainly.

"I shrank them," she elaborated, pulling her wand out from the back waistband of her shorts briefly to show him before putting it back.

"Hermione!" he hissed. "You'll get caught!"

"Oh, honestly Harry," she began with a sigh. "Haven't you read anything about America? There aren't any underage magic laws here. The U.S. magical government is of the opinion that it is best for students to use their magic whenever and wherever possible, in order to get practice. It's actually part of the magical constitution: freedom to bear wands. They don't monitor underage magic here."

"But our wands are from Britain!" he pressed. "They could still track them here!"

She sighed once more. "Harry, the Ministry doesn't track wands. They track location. While it would make sense for them to place a tracker on every wand that Mr. Ollivander sells, it just wouldn't be feasible. They would have to deactivate the tracker for every witch

or wizard who turns seventeen, making for a lot more work. Also, if they were tracking the wands alone, they would receive countless underage magic detections during the school year, due to the amount we use our wands at Hogwarts. So the Ministry tracks underage magic use based on where it occurs, not by which wand performs it. Hogwarts is naturally excluded from the detection system. As a result, they can't track us here. We can do magic as we please while we're here."

"Oh..." Harry replied, as he absently felt his wand in the front pocket of his jeans. Due to the large size of his cousin's clothes and their subsequent deep pockets, his wand fit perfectly. Ever since he had been scolded, once more, by Moody for carrying it in his back pocket, he had taken to carrying his wand in his front pocket.

Hermione, for her part, let her eyes follow Harry's hand as he felt for his wand. "Is that a wand in your pocket, Harry?" she joked. "Or are you just-"

"Hermione," Ellen warned quietly. "Is that really appropriate?"

"No, mum," Hermione mumbled, looking at the ground.

"And am I going to have to separate you two?" Ellen pressed jokingly.

"No, mum."

"Then both of you need to watch what you're saying, alright?"

"Yes mum," Hermione said.

"Yes ma'am," Harry responded.

"That's better. Now that we're through with that ugly business, let's keep going, shall we? We're burning daylight here."

"Right," Harry sighed. "What's next?"

"You're just getting one pair of slacks, Harry?" Hermione asked. "Don't you think you should get at least one more? Just in case?"

"How about khaki?" Ellen suggested helpfully, noticing that Hermione had only had Harry try on a black and a gray pair. If he ever found it necessary to wear them during their trip, a pair of khaki might help immensely in the desert heat.

Harry nodded in agreement as he went to put the gray pair back and retrieve a pair of khaki that were similar in size and style to the black pair he liked. He returned to the other two a moment later, ready to continue shopping.

"Aren't you going to try them on?" Hermione asked.

"Why? I already know the black ones fit, and these are exactly the same. What's the point?"

Hermione didn't answer, but instead shook her head in mock disgust. Harry smiled broadly at his ability to shorten their time in the store by not trying on another article of clothing.

"Fine then," the youngest Granger began, "we need shirts. And ties. And at least one sport jacket. Oh, and shoes. And black socks. But if you're going to get the khakis, then we need brown shoes and brown socks too. Oh, we've got so much more to do!" she squealed.

Harry rolled his eyes and sighed as he prepared himself mentally for another long round of clothes shopping.

July 24, 2011

7:59 PM

Harry, Hermione, and Ellen returned to their hotel nearly three hours after setting off for their shopping excursion. Despite his resentment towards the torture of shopping with two women, Harry was somewhat pleased with the new wardrobe they had managed to settle on. He now had a large amount of casual clothes for their holiday, as well as a small assortment of various formal clothes, just in case the situation called for them.

As they reached their rooms, Harry searched through his pockets for their room key at the same moment as Ellen opened the door and entered hers. Just as Harry found the key, Ellen stuck her head back into the hall to address the two teens.

"When you're done putting those away," she said, referring to the clothes, "you wanna come over here?"

Harry and Hermione shrugged in agreement before Harry opened the door to their room. The two entered and Harry pulled out his shrunken Nordstroms purchases, including a carefully folded suit jacket. He placed them on the counter in the kitchen as Hermione did the same with the Abercrombie bags. Then, Hermione reached behind her back and lifted her shirt up to access her wand.

Harry averted his eyes slightly as her tank rode up, exposing a bit of skin. Can't look, he told himself. Can't look. It wouldn't be right...I don't want to look awkward around her like she said earlier. But he glanced back quickly just as her clothing returned to normal.

A moment later, when his purchases had been returned to normal and stowed away with the rest of his belongings, Harry and Hermione left their room and knocked on the door to Ellen and Richard's. Ellen answered the door almost immediately.

"Where're your new clothes?" she asked Harry.

"I thought it was getting too late to change and would be kinda pointless," Harry replied as they stepped into the room and Ellen closed the door behind them. As Harry and Hermione entered, they were greeted by the sight of their entire party, plus one: Severus Snape. Harry sighed in disgust as he laid eyes on his least favorite professor, but said nothing.

"Ah, Harry, excellent," Minerva said as she saw them enter. "And Hermione. Perfect. Severus had just joined us when Ellen returned, and we managed to convince him to wait for you two before beginning."

"It wasn't easy," Sirius offered.

"Beginning what?" Harry asked.

"His report on what he's found out so far, of course," Minerva explained. "Severus has been here for a few days already, and has been able to learn some basic information about what is going on. Severus?"

Snape straightened up in his seat on the sofa, revealing that, for once, he was not sporting long, billowing black robes. Instead, he looked to be wearing a solid black tee over black jeans, with his long hair tied back in a neat ponytail.

"As most of you know," Snape began, glaring at Harry, "but some of you may have forgotten, I brought young Mr. Malfoy here a few days ago under the pretense of visiting his father and learning about his business ventures. While it was not easy to convince Lucius to allow the visit, in the end he trusted me enough to allow it. However, whatever Lucius is hiding for the Dark Lord must be of great importance, as Lucius has not let any scraps of information slip thus far. Despite this...disappointing setback, my time here has not been wasted, unlike some of you would be predisposed to do." He looked at Harry pointedly before continuing. "I have, in fact, learned much about Mr. Malfoy's property. You may have noticed it when outside this hotel, as it is just down the street, across from the resort that looks like a large obsidian pyramid. The Luxor, I believe they call it. At any rate, Mr. Malfoy's hotel is directly across the street from The Luxor, and is named The Merlin, for obvious reasons. It is the first hybrid casino in Las Vegas, combining elements of both the magical and muggle worlds. As such, it caters to members of both societies."

"Then what's to stop the magical people from cheating in the casino?" Harry asked.

Snape sighed irritably. "Potter, your mouth moves faster than your brain. I was getting to that point. However, to respond to your impatience, let me explain what I have learned through both my wanderings within The Merlin, as well as some research into Las Vegas itself. Traditional Las Vegas casinos must abide by a series of rules and regulations set forth by the Nevada Gaming Commission, often referred to as the NGC. These rules govern various aspects of the casino, and work to ensure fairness for both the resort and their players. While it is the first magical resort in Las Vegas, The Merlin is not the first magical resort in the United States. As a result, there is a national Magical Gaming Commission, or MGC, that provides various rules and regulations for play in a magical resort. The Merlin must abide by the rules of both regulatory bodies."

"So what does that mean in the end?" Richard asked. "Different security measures?"

Snape nodded. "In a word, yes. The Merlin must comply with security measures required by the MGC. However, all other Las Vegas casinos must abide by them as well, a fact which could lead to some confusion for more feeble minds, so allow me to explain. Like in Britain, the United States separates the muggle and magical world, by employing the International Statute of Secrecy. However, every muggle casino in Las Vegas, whether they know it or not, employs at least one undercover MGC agent who is in charge of magical security for that resort. Lacking this key staff member would mean that a witch or wizard could walk into a muggle casino and use magic to alter the outcome of a game. The Merlin is not required to have this MGC agent, due to the fact that the resort is registered with the MGC as a magical resort. This allows The Merlin to effectively control their own security entirely in-house. But they must comply with strict security requirements, due to the fact that they are likely to attract a larger magical population than the muggle casinos. The first, and most obvious security measure put in place at The Merlin, as well as by the MGC on every other casino, are anti-apparition and anti-portkey wards. This prevents a thief from simply vanishing from the property. However, this has the unfortunate side effect of hampering the effectiveness of resort security, as they can no longer apparate within the property either. In addition, the property is protected by a unique ward at every door. From what I've gathered, it combines an age line with an anti-glamour ward. In essence, it reverses any form of appearance modification or aging magic, in order to reveal a patron's true appearance and age. However, this line has only been placed on the exterior doors, as Lucius has been able to avoid placing it in the restrooms as well."

"What good does that do?" Hermione asked. "Wouldn't he get in trouble with the MGC?"

"Actually, it makes perfect sense," Remus mused. "Lucius has never been above any method of making some quick cash. While I can't be certain, I assume that the MGC only requires this special ward on the exterior doors. If that's the case, Lucius doesn't have to put them inside the casino. So, in theory, someone could enter the casino looking like their usual self, then go to the restroom and apply a glamour charm or something to change their appearance. It would make sense for Lucius to walk a fine line between legal and illegal in

an attempt to make as much money as possible. Doing it this way would mean that there could be some underage gamblers in his casino, without him having to do anything about it."

"As much as I hate to say it, wolf," Snape grumbled, "you are correct. However, the security measures do not end there. As you may or may not have noticed when walking through the casino downstairs, there is a unique smell to the air. Muggles believe this to be a form of perfume that is circulated throughout the casino to improve the smell of the air and mask the vile smoke from muggle cigarettes. However, that is not the case. Instead, the smell comes from a vaporized anti-polyjuice potion that is circulated throughout the casino, in order to reverse the effects of polyjuice potion."

"What's the timeframe for its effectiveness?" Hermione asked. "Since it's vaporized, I can't imagine it being as potent or quick as in liquid form."

"You are correct, Miss Granger," Snape groused. "In this form, the potion should take approximately three minutes to be effective."

"Sounds like they're pretty serious about this whole security thing," Richard observed.

"Indeed," Snape agreed, nodding. "However, there are still more security measures to discuss. The entirety of the casino floor is monitored by a magic detection system. This means that only registered wands can be used on the casino floor without alerting security. Due to MGC regulations, only security personnel can use registered wands, to prevent games from being rigged by dealers. This also allows security to have complete control over most matters on the casino floor, including obliviation of muggles who witness any magic being performed."

"What else?" Harry asked.

"At this point, Potter, I am unaware of any further security measures. However, my access to the resort is quite limited, despite my...connections."

"Then we'll just have to visit the place tomorrow, won't we?" Harry proposed.

"Potter," Snape began slowly, "if you decide to pursue that course of action, I must caution you to be very careful. These security measures are not to be trifled with. I advise you to bear that in mind and defer any planning or decisions to the adults."

"Fine then," Harry said, "what would you do?"

"I would not allow you to go," Snape replied smugly. "You would only be a liability, as your past...instabilities have shown. You tend to act first and think later, common traits for a Gryffindor such as yourself. My suggestion would be for you to stay behind and let the adults scout out The Merlin."

"Fat chance of that," Harry muttered.

"Then I can be of no more help to you tonight," Snape announced, rising. Harry's eyes widened. He thought he had been quiet enough with his renunciation that Snape would not be able to hear.

"You forget, Potter, that my hearing is quite excellent. Bear that in mind next time you complain about my class behind my back." With that, he strode out of the room. Harry and Hermione's eyes followed him as he left, half expecting billowing robes, despite the fact that he was not wearing any.

"Well, that went well," Harry commented once Snape had gone.

"Could've gone worse," Hermione responded, sitting down on one of the barstools. "At least we learned something, which is not something we can always say about Professor Snape."

"So you're gonna visit The Merlin tomorrow then?" Richard asked.

"I would assume so," Harry replied, looking to Sirius, Remus, and Minerva for confirmation. Despite the fact that they had come along, he didn't want to assume that Hermione's parents wanted anything to do with their little quest.

Sirius nodded in confirmation, giving Harry the answer he needed.

"I guess we'll have to get up early again then," Harry whined.

As he finished speaking, Hermione let out a large yawn.

"Speaking of getting up early," Ellen said, "it's getting late. For us at least, since we got up so early. I think it might be time to call it a night."

"Good idea," her husband agreed. "Hermione, Harry, take care of yourself and have a good night, alright?" He looked directly at Harry as he said this, causing Harry to shrink back slightly.

Hermione stood from her temporary seat and made her way toward the door, as Sirius, Remus, and Minerva all rose and bid each other good night. Harry opened the door for Hermione and the two returned to their room.

Despite her parents' suggestion, Hermione did not go directly to bed, nor did Harry. In fact, as soon as they entered their room, Harry asked Hermione for her help.

"Hermione...can you help me set up my computer?" he asked.

"We did that in the airport and on the plane," she replied.

"Yeah, but we couldn't get it working on the Internet, remember? From what I hear, I need to get it going with that in order to truly experience what the computer can do."

Remembering that Harry was completely illiterate when it came to technological matters due to his upbringing with the Dursleys, Hermione consented to lend her assistance. Thirty minutes later, after showing Harry how to connect to the hotel's wireless Internet connection and showing him some basic functions of the Internet, Hermione left him to his own devices in the sitting room and headed off to bed.

After changing into her nightclothes in the bathroom that was connected to her bedroom, Hermione returned to the bedroom proper and reopened the door. As the sun dipped below the horizon and the shadows in the sitting room grew longer, Hermione found that the main source of light in the room was the bluish glow coming from Harry's computer. With a subtle shake of her head, Hermione left the door open and climbed into bed.

However, despite her best attempts, Hermione was not able to fall asleep. While she could feel herself drifting away into sleep, she just found herself opening her eyes constantly to check the clock. Something just wasn't right.

As she checked the clock one more time to find that it was nearing midnight and she still hadn't fallen asleep, Hermione sat up and threw her legs over the side of the bed. The entire room was bathed in a pale blue light, allowing her to see despite the blackness of night. She walked over to the slightly open door and poked her head out to see Harry hunched over his computer, tapping away at the keyboard.

"Harry?" she asked quietly, "what're you still doing up?"

Startled by her sudden appearance, Harry jerked his head up from the screen. "Um...there's just so much to do," he whispered, rubbing his eyes. "I never realized how much stuff is on the Internet. Besides, I have a lot of catching up to do and everything."

Hermione gave him a sad smile and nodded slightly. "Alright, but don't stay up too late. We have to get up early tomorrow, remember?"

"Yes mum," he joked tiredly as he turned back to his computer.

With another sad smile, Hermione went back into her room and closed the door softly behind her. She needed her sleep and wasn't going to allow Harry and his computer to keep her away from it.

End of Chapter 7

A/N: I just want to talk about a few things at the end of this chapter, and address a few reviews in the process. First off, let's talk about timeline. After I posted chapter 6, I received at least two reviews stating that the technology in the story is not consistent with the timeline of the original books. That is, indeed, completely correct. However, as I stated before the first chapter, this story is set in modern times. So what does that mean? It simply means that the magical world has been brought forward by 15 years. The muggle world, or our world, has not changed at all. Everything that happened in canon has been moved forward by 15 years. However, there are some exceptions. If I were to write something about the fall

of Grindelwald, that would be quite complicated (it could happen...*wink*). However, since we know from canon that Grindelwald was defeated at the end of World War II, I can't very well move that. So, for the sake of keeping things simple, all I'm doing here is adding 15 years of empty space immediately following 1945, at least in the magical world. This would work out to make Dumbledore older, of course, and would add a few other changes, such as an extra fifteen years of studying that Tom Riddle was given (however, that will not factor into the story). So everything that happened before 1945 stays the same, but it's as if the events of 1946 happened in 1960. If that sounds odd, it is. But there are several benefits of this change, at least to me. The first is that I can use modern conveniences in this series, which is always a bonus. This has a subsequent benefit of making the writing of this story easier, due to the fact that the amount of research is greatly reduced (it allows for easier pricing of items, prevents the misuse of technology, etc...). But the main reason I chose to set this story, and its follow-up stories in the present is what is going to happen in the next story. But I'll talk about that in the next part of this note. Suffice it to say that everything in this series is set in this offset timeline, and this story is set in the present. It is not a mistake, it is completely purposeful. I know that the Harry Potter book series starts in 1991, I know that Harry was born, at least in canon, in 1980. I know all of that. However, for my purposes, he was born in 1995, and started Hogwarts in 2006.

Now, I did touch on the next story in this series. I don't want to talk about it too much, since part 2 of this series is the one I've done the least preparation for. However, I will say that, when I was designing this four-part series, I originally started with my long list of story ideas. Eventually, I realized that, with only a few minor changes (such as changing the era), I could tie them all together and make one larger story. However, one of the main tenets of this series is that it should be "pick up and read." In other words, one should be able to read any part of it and understand it, for the most part, without having read the other parts. Will there be references and common story threads? Absolutely. However, one thing I wanted to avoid, that I usually see here on FFnet, is that as subsequent parts of a series are posted, they receive fewer and fewer reviews. I believe this to be due to the increasing level of investment required to read each subsequent part. I wanted to avoid that. Therefore, the titles of these stories will not have numbers, or indicate that they are sequels. The only common thread will be the word "Time" in the title.

In other words, this story is named "Stealing Time." Part two is called, at least right now, "Playing Time," and will be quite short (maybe a oneshot). Part three is named "Killing Time," and part four "Passing Time." Anyway, when I came up with the idea for "Playing Time," it required that the story be set in the modern day, even though Harry and friends are still in school. Therefore, when I made the move to create somewhat of a loosely connected series, all four stories moved to the modern era. One thing I will mention is that everything about the modern world is going to transfer over to this story. While that doesn't mean I'm going to talk about everything on Earth, it does mean that one very major...something, that doesn't exist in canon, will exist in this story, or at the very least, will play a large role in part two. I haven't decided yet if I'll mention it in passing in "Stealing Time." I'll leave it up to your imaginations to figure out what it is, however.

I wrote this long missive based on a long anonymous review I received for chapter 6. While I could just as easily have deleted it and ignored its contents, it was a very well written review, and I didn't think it deserved to simply be thrown away. I simply wanted to address its contents, which questioned the technology I had used so far.

Another thing I want to talk about is another review I received. One review asked if this was "Harry Potter as 'Oceans 11.'" I don't want to make that kind of comparison. I will say that this is a heist story, which many of you may have already assumed. I will also say that "Oceans 11" was part of the inspiration for this story. However, part of the inspiration came from my own trip to Las Vegas, as well as a number of other sources. The fact that this story is set in Las Vegas, involves a casino, and a group of people, are about the only things I intentionally included in this story that are similar to "Oceans 11." Well...there may be a few other bits in there as well, but that's still to come. If I'm perfectly honest, the working title for this story when it was a standalone story was "Potter's Eleven."

Well, I think I've rambled on for long enough here, so I'll leave you with my customary hint as to the title of the next chapter. Again, I do apologize for not doing an adequate job of hinting at this chapter's title. However, while there were many guesses as to the title of chapter 7, the title of chapter 8 was inadvertently guessed. So if you want to sift through the reviews, you'll find it there. Otherwise, keep reading:

Chapter Title Hint: In chapter 8, Harry will find himself visiting Malfoy's casino, so there will be some blackjack involved. It really is so easy, when you know the rules.

Anyway, I hope that hint suffices. I also hope you enjoyed chapter 7, and I do thank you for reading and making it through this long note; I just wanted to talk about a few things that I've missed so far. If you enjoyed this chapter, then please let me know in a review, and I'll see you soon with chapter 8.

Chapter 8

Play the Game

July 25, 2011

7:37 AM

"Harry James Potter! If you don't get up in five minutes, so help me I'll levitate that sofa and dump you onto the floor!" Hermione yelled playfully as she walked back into the sitting room, trying for the third time that morning to wake Harry.

Cracking open his eyes, Harry blinked furiously to get used to the light streaming through the glass door next to him. Part of one of her previous attempts at waking him had involved opening the heavy curtains that had previously shielded the room from light. But still Harry had ignored her attempts, trying desperately to fall back asleep, but to no avail. Sitting up and letting the thin blanket slide down his chest, Harry stretched and yawned loudly, announcing that he was now awake.

"Took you long enough," Hermione complained from her position directly above Harry. "Honestly, I told you last night that we would be getting up early. You had plenty of time, but no! You just had to play on that blasted computer all night, didn't you? Thank Merlin for small favors that that thing won't work at Hogwarts, otherwise it would be a waste of my time trying to get you to study!"

"Oh, so that's what it all comes down to, eh?" Harry asked jokingly as he rose from the sofa into a sitting position against the back cushion. "Leave it to Hermione to make it all about studying. 'Books and cleverness,' as she says."

"That was just once and you know it!" she argued, planting her hands on her hips. It was apparent that she had been awake for a while already, due to the fact that she was already fully dressed in a pair of short jean shorts and baby blue tee. Her hair, however, was another story, as it cascaded down her back in its typical bushy fashion.

"I know, I know," Harry replied in his own defense. "It's just fun to get you riled up sometimes."

"Don't you go turning into Ron," she warned. "One of him is bad enough."

"Relax. There's no way I'll do that," Harry responded, easing Hermione's concerns. She sighed exaggeratedly in relief. "I don't think I could pull off the red hair, so no deal."

Hermione scowled playfully in response, causing Harry to laugh as he rose and searched through the drawers of the armoire for clothes for the day.

"Why didn't you pull out the sofa bed?" Hermione asked, finally realizing that the sofa was still in the same form it had been in the day before.

"Didn't have time," Harry said as he shrugged his shoulders, still hunched over the drawer.

"You mean you spent too much time on your computer and you decided it would take too much effort?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny your statement."

"Prat."

Harry jerked his head up and looked directly at her. "You called my name?"

Hermione waved him off and chuckled as she walked back into the bedroom. "Get ready," she called from the other room. "We've gotta go get breakfast before we head out."

"Do we have to?" Harry whined as he carried a pair of khaki cargo shorts and his new green polo into the second of the two bathrooms, which happened to be much smaller than the one off of the bedroom. Fifteen minutes later, Harry emerged from the bathroom, showered, shaved, dressed and feeling largely refreshed. He found Hermione sitting on the still intact sofa, her book on casino games perched in her lap.

"I thought you read that all on the flight yesterday?" Harry asked.

"I did," she replied, not looking up. "But I wanted to read it again."

"Why? What's the point if you've read it before?"

Hermione rolled her eyes as she looked up from her book. "And that question explains a great many things. Reading something more than once lets you remember it better. That's the whole theory behind studying."

"Okay....I get that. But I was talking about that book there. Why read it again if you've read it before?"

"I was just brushing up, Harry. Remember, we are going to a casino today. It might be helpful to know something about how they work."

"True, but I really didn't peg you for someone who'd gamble. Especially when they're under the legal age here."

Hermione stuck her tongue out at him mockingly.

"Very mature," he laughed. "Now all we need are fart jokes and we'll have completed the circle."

She closed her book and rose from the cheap, velour sculpted sofa. "I honestly don't see how that thing was comfortable all night," she said as she put the book on the table. "I couldn't sit there for more than fifteen or twenty minutes without having to get up."

Harry shrugged his shoulders in response. "Guess I'm just used to an uncomfortable bed."

"Well you shouldn't be," she replied quietly. "And to answer your question," she added, raising her voice, "it never hurts to be prepared. You may not think I'd ever gamble, but that doesn't mean that the knowledge won't be helpful. What happens if you want to play a game there? I am assuming, of course, that you plan to."

"I would be negligent in my duties as a male if I didn't," he replied cheekily. "The first rule in the book of man laws is that if you see a casino, you are morally obligated to play at least one game of something."

"Boys and their Bond fantasies," she muttered as she finished putting on her sandals and made her way to the door.

"And besides," he continued, ignoring her statement, "I read about the game last night online. There's just so much stuff on that Internet that it's uncanny!"

"I can't believe you spent all night just reading about how to play blackjack," she mused. "Anyway, come on. We're supposed to have breakfast in Professor McG...I mean Minerva's room."

"Almost slip up there, Hermione?" Harry asked as they stepped into the hall.

"Shut up. You try calling a professor by their first name after using their title for so long!"

"Minerva. Minerva. Minerva. Minerva. See? I did it just fine," he goaded.

"You can be so childish sometimes," she said as she knocked on the door.

"Yes, but that's why you love me, right?" he asked in response as the door opened.

"You what?" Richard asked as he opened the door, catching only the last bit of the teens' conversation.

Hermione's head whirled around from facing Harry to her father. "Nothing," she answered quickly, not making eye contact.

"It didn't sound like nothing," Richard observed. "In fact, I distinctly heard Harry here asking if, and I quote, 'that's why you love' him. Is that right?"

Harry didn't answer, out of fear for his own safety, and instead looked at Hermione pleadingly.

"Well, you didn't exactly hear the entire conversation, daddy," she said finally. "We were just joking around and I told Harry that he was being childish. That's when he said what you heard."

"Uh huh," Richard grunted, unconvinced.

"Honestly, Richard," Ellen said, pushing her way beside him. "Is that any way to treat your own daughter? Now you two, come in. Minerva was insistent that we wait until you two showed up so that breakfast would still be hot when you got here." She moved Richard out of the way, opening the door wider to allow Harry and Hermione into the room.

While the two teens had not been in the transfiguration professor's room before, they were not surprised to find it laid out very similarly to their own. The furnishings, décor, and overall layout of the room were identical to theirs, as well as the other two rooms they had seen so far. Like the other rooms, every aspect of the room was neutrally decorated, from the dark, cream walls with white molding, to the brown berber carpet adorned with a diamond pattern, and was designed to appear sophisticated while remaining unimposing.

"Ah, there you are," Minerva said, coming out of the small kitchenette next to the door. "I was waiting for you two, since this'll give me the opportunity to show you something that I normally wouldn't show until sixth year at the earliest. Conjunction."

Sirius groaned from the sofa upon hearing that breakfast would involve learning, earning himself an elbow from Remus. "Shut it, Padfoot," Remus chided. "You had to learn it somewhere, and so do they."

"But I don't wanna go back to school!" Sirius whined in a childlike voice. "I don't wanna."

"There are a lot of things I know you don't want to do. But if you don't shut up now, I'll force you to do every single one of them," Remus threatened emptily, glaring at his best friend.

"Like what?" Sirius asked defiantly.

"Gentlemen!" Minerva bellowed, gaining their attention. "I hardly think that your pointless bickering is proving beneficial in any way. So shall we eat or do you want us to go hungry listening to you two quarrel?"

"No, Minerva," they replied in unison, cowering under her intimidating personality.

"Now Harry, Hermione," Minerva began, launching into a full lecture, "and of course your parents, there are those in the magical world who strongly believe that the best way to prepare food is through old-fashioned cooking."

"In other words, Molly," Sirius interjected.

"Not helping Mr. Black," Minerva said without looking at him. "But at any rate, she would be one of them. However, there are those of us who, when pressed for time, will use an alternate method of preparing food: conjuration. Of course, this requires great skill in both transfiguration and charms, as well as great mental discipline. In short, it is not something that should be attempted by a novice. Or Mr. Black here. That said, conjuration allows for quick meal preparation, as well as the ability to create dishes that would not otherwise be possible. For instance," she paused as she withdrew her wand from her purple muggle-style vest that accompanied an off-white long-sleeved shirt, "if we wanted a full English fry-up breakfast, all I would need to do is visualize it and perform the appropriate wand movements. Those are not important at this point, since there are too many to teach now. We'll cover those in class. For now, just be familiar with the concept."

"I thought summer meant we were supposed to get away from school," Harry muttered. Hermione shot him a glare before focusing her attention back on Minerva.

As Harry's attention wandered for that brief moment, Minerva completed her conjuration, leaving a large assortment of various breakfast foods on the counter. True to her word, she had provided the typical English fry-up breakfast, complete with bacon, eggs, fried mushrooms, toast, and sausage. Baked beans and hash browns were also included.

"Smashing!" Richard exclaimed, rushing over to examine the food. "Why didn't you show us that trick when you came to convince us to send Hermione to Hogwarts? Would've saved us the cost of an entire meal!"

"Yes, but would you have trusted food that simply appeared out of thin air?" Minerva asked. "I certainly wouldn't if I was in the same position you were in. Hence the reason I showed you what I did. Now, enough talking about theory. Let's eat before it gets cold."

"Great idea!" Richard agreed. "If this magic food tastes half as good as it smells, I think we're in for a real treat!" He grabbed a plate and made for the bacon.

"Watch the fat," Ellen warned her husband as began to pile the fatty meat onto his plate.

"But it tastes so good," he whined as he moved over to the sausage. "Bacon really needs to be considered a condiment. Then all would be right in the world."

"Agreed," Harry said as he moved up beside the older man, plate in hand.

"Ugh, boys," Hermione grunted.

"What?" Harry asked as he piled on the mushrooms and eggs.

"You can be so much like Ronald sometimes that it's uncanny."

"I think I'll take that as an insult," Harry replied, confused. "I think."

"Trust me," Ellen interjected, "it was an insult. At least I think it was based on the way she talks about that boy at home."

Harry's interest was piqued by this statement. "How's that?" he asked, as he sat down at the small circular table between the kitchen bar and the sitting room.

"Mum..." Hermione said warningly, but Ellen ignored her.

"Oh, she just tends to prattle on about how much of an insensitive sod that Weasel boy is."

"Weasley," Hermione corrected quietly, embarrassed at having her mother tell Harry about her summer behavior. She could not, however, tell if her mother had honestly mispronounced Ron's last name, or if she was simply insulting him.

"Yes, Weasley, whatever," Ellen said dismissively. "But he seems to be uncouth and inconsiderate towards others, if what Hermione says is anything to go by."

"Well, he is a good friend," Harry replied. "And it isn't all bad. But I will admit that he seems to get almost excited at the prospect of another argument with Hermione."

"And that's my point," Ellen concurred. "Arguing and bickering are not bases for a good relationship, friendly or otherwise. I'm just glad Hermione here didn't misinterpret his arguing for caring or sexual tension or some other nonsense like that. A good relationship is based on mutual trust and respect. Almost like the relationship you two have."

"Mum!" Hermione exclaimed.

"What?" her mother asked innocently. "I was just making an observation."

"It's true you know," Sirius added, having listened in on the entire conversation from the sofa on the far side of the room. "You two do have a good relationship that would be the basis for a healthy-

"Not helping, Sirius," Harry interrupted.

"What're you talking about?" he asked. "I was just making an observation," he added, purposefully using the same words as Ellen. Sirius and Ellen shared a not-too-subtle wink at this.

"What're you two playing at?" Hermione asked with a groan.

"I have no idea what you mean, dear," Ellen replied in a sickeningly sweet tone.

"Oh, don't even bother trying to cover it up," Richard cut in. "We all know what you two are trying to do. Personally, I think it's barmy to try and you should just let it be."

"Well," Harry said loudly, attempting to end the conversation. "Shall we get going?" He glanced at the clock then to Hermione

significantly. Fortunately for him, she caught onto what he was trying to do.

"Oh wow," she said, feigning surprise, "it's starting to get late. We've better get moving if we want to get to The Merlin and have enough time to do...whatever it is we want to do."

"What do you mean it's getting late?" Remus asked, sharing a smirk with Sirius. He too had caught on and was trying to make breakfast as uncomfortable for the teens as possible. "We've got plenty of time. Stay. Enjoy yourselves."

"Oh, but we have to remember how much time it takes to get down to the MGM, let alone how long it'll take to get all the way over to The Merlin," Harry rationalized, trying to prop up their excuse for leaving.

Hermione stood quickly. "Here mum," she said, seeing her mother's empty plate. "Lemme get that for you." Without waiting for a response, Hermione grabbed Ellen's plate and took it into the small kitchen to place in the sink. The remnants of breakfast still adorned the black granite counters, leaving precious little space to put the dishes besides in the sink.

"But what if I wasn't done yet?" Ellen asked playfully.

"Oh, mum," Hermione began, "don't you know that smaller, lighter meals are better for you, especially if you have them more frequently?" He bit her lip in anticipation of her mother's response. However, Ellen was not the person who replied to her statement.

"I, for one, agree," Minerva announced, rising and taking her plate to the sink as well. "You can just put them in the sink and I'll scourify them later. Washing the dishes gives me something to do."

Hermione gave Minerva a thankful look as she mouthed a silent "Thank you." The older woman nodded in return, giving her star pupil a small smile.

"Oh, fine," Ellen grumbled as she rose from her seat. "But it's only just nine o'clock. Are you sure it isn't too early to go out?"

"Oh, I think the earlier we start the better," Hermione said quickly.
"Everyone ready?"

"Wait, shouldn't we stay and talk about this?" Sirius asked. "I mean, there are so many variables to consider, like what we're gonna do when we get there, and how we're gonna get in there in the first place. Forgive me for saying so, but you two don't quite look like you're twenty one years old."

"Easy," Hermione replied. "Remember what Professor Snape said last night? The wards don't extend into the restrooms. Pretty typical, really. I can't imagine Malfoy operating any other way. He's doing just the bare minimum to stay within the confines of the law, while ensuring maximum returns for himself. Immoral, but not necessarily illegal."

"So you're saying we just waltz into there like we currently are?" Sirius balked. "Are you crazy? I'm a wanted man!"

"In Britain, yes," Minerva said, following Hermione's logic. "But this is an entirely different country. Yes, the casino is run by a British wizard, but that doesn't mean you'll be recognized. All we have to do is get to the restrooms and change our appearances there. Almost like magic," she finished with a rare joke.

"Har har," Sirius said. "Now there's a knee-slapper. Really split my sides there. I can't stop laughing that was so funny."

"Are you quite finished Mr. Black?" Minerva asked condescendingly.

"Yes," he replied sheepishly.

July 25, 2011

9:48 AM

"Can you believe them back there?" Hermione asked Harry as the pair trailed behind the adults. They had just entered the casino floor of the MGM Grand, and were making their way through it, following the overhead signage to one of the resort's exits.

"You mean how your mum and Sirius were acting?" Harry questioned in response.

"Yeah. It was like they were pushing us together. Not very subtle if you ask me."

"Yeah, talk about barmy," Harry chuckled nervously, not making eye contact with Hermione.

"Yeah," Hermione replied quietly.

Silence reigned for the next few moments as the two teens walked in awkward quietness, increasing their pace to catch up to the others. As they walked, the group passed the MGM's lion enclosure, which was surrounded by a large collection of onlookers, trying desperately to catch a glimpse of one of the African beasts. However, the two lions that could be seen appeared to be sleeping.

"You'd think they'd lose interest," Richard commented. "The things are sleeping, there isn't anything to see! So what's the point in standing there with your face pressed up against the glass?"

"That doesn't matter," Harry replied. "It's the concept of lions that gets people excited. I mean, I'd be over there with my face pressed against the glass too if I hadn't been to a zoo before. Granted, I found the snake exhibit more entertaining than the lion enclosure, but still..."

"I sense there's a story there," Ellen said.

"You have no idea," Harry replied cryptically.

"And I don't think we'll hear it," Ellen concluded.

"Maybe some other time," Harry said. "When we're not in such a...public place."

"Ah."

Having passed the lion enclosure, the group found themselves entering a large circular room, with a large part of the wall taken up by a series of large television screens, with rows of sofas in front of them.

"They even do sports betting?" Hermione asked, bewildered.

"Of course," her mother replied. "This is Vegas, you bet on everything."

"I guess," Hermione said, her attention still focused on the sports betting area. "But it still seems kinda-"

"Poker!" Richard exclaimed, interrupting her train of thought. He pointed at the circular enclosure at the center of the room. Labeled as the Poker Room, there were already a large number of players inside scattered among the various tables, despite the early hour.

"Yes Richard," Ellen replied patronizingly. "That's the poker room. And there are people playing poker inside of it. What did you expect?"

He didn't respond, but instead glared playfully at his wife as the group passed the poker room, still following the signs.

"Upstairs," Hermione said, pointing to the escalator with a sign that indicated that the exit was at its top.

"Funny," Remus mused as they rode the escalator, "I don't feel like I'm underground. Must've been so subtle I didn't notice us going down." Sirius, for his part, was gripping the side rails tightly, unsure about the muggle contraption.

"What's wrong, Sirius?" Harry taunted, "I thought you would've been used to moving stairs after spending seven years dealing with them."

"You know, kiddo, one of these days that tongue of yours is going to get you into trouble," Sirius retorted. But then his eyes brightened.

"Oh no," Remus complained, "I know that look. He's got a good prank lined up. Trust me; I've seen that look before."

"What?" Sirius asked innocently. "I wasn't planning anything. I was just going to say that tongues might not always get you into trouble. They can also get you into some very good places...if you know what I mean."

Harry blushed, but turned away quickly. "No, Sirius, I don't know what you mean." He glanced at Richard, who for his part was glaring at Sirius.

"And you don't need to know," Richard growled as they reached the resort's exit at the top of the escalator.

"One of these days, Harry," Sirius promised. "I'll give you a good talking-to about how things work."

"Mr. Black," Minerva began, "I do hope you mean about the workings of the world. No young man should ever deserve to be subjected to what I can only assume is your version of 'The Talk.' I don't think there is a person on Earth who's done anything horrible enough to deserve that."

"Oh Minerva, you wound me!" Sirius whined, clutching his chest.

The group emerged from the darkness of the MGM Grand casino and into the bright mid-morning sun of Las Vegas. Squinting, they took stock of their surroundings, and found themselves near the large golden statue of a lion that lay in front of the property.

"Now that's ironic," Harry commented. "I don't remember seeing that thing yesterday. Now it makes sense that they would have lions inside."

"It'll make even more sense when I show you The Wizard of Oz," Hermione replied as they approached the statue, which marked the corner of the intersection that was populated by four different resorts.

"That one looks interesting," Harry said as he pointed across the street at what appeared to be a scaled-down cityscape.

"That's New York New York," Hermione informed him. "And that's about all I know about it."

"What?" Harry gasped. "How's that possible?"

Hermione slapped him on his arm playfully. "Shut up!" she said with a giggle. "I'm not that bad! Besides, I haven't been inside of it, so I can't be expected to know everything about it."

"Yeah, but you knew everything about Hogwarts before being there, remember?"

"I hardly think there's a book called New York New York, A History," she retorted. "So don't go expecting me to know every last thing about it."

But Harry had stopped paying attention, as he looked at the property across from New York New York. "And that," he said, "looks like a bad knockoff of Hogwarts."

"Excalibur," Sirius read from the large sign out front. "How much do I not want to go in there? It looks like a child's amusement park!"

"Enough gawking you two," Ellen commanded. "Harry, you and Hermione wanted to get going, so let's get going. The Merlin isn't going to scout itself you know."

However, despite her urging, Harry continued to fall behind as he looked around in awe, eventually trailing a good distance behind the rest of the group. Seeing this, Ellen took advantage of the situation to do something she had been meaning to make time for all day.

Slowing down, Ellen waited for Hermione to catch up, then glanced behind them to make sure Harry was still out of earshot. "Alright, now that he can't hear us, we can talk," she said to her daughter as they met up.

"Not this again, mum," Hermione complained.

"Yes this again," Ellen retorted. "I just wanna have a talk about some things while we have a spare moment. You have no idea how much I fought for you to be able to room with Harry, so I think I deserve at least this conversation as a reward."

"Fine," her daughter groaned. "But we better make it quick, since we'll be there soon."

"Then I'll just ask this: how was your night?" Ellen gave Hermione a sinister smile as she awaited her answer.

"Fine," Hermione replied grumpily, keeping her gaze focused ahead. "I mean, Harry was up until all hours playing on that blasted

computer of his, but could I honestly expect any different? It's his newest toy."

"Alright," Ellen continued slowly. "But how did it go over when he saw that there was only one bed?"

Now Hermione realized where this conversation was headed. She had had an inkling before, but the fact that her mother had stooped to the level of actually asking that question only confirmed her suspicions.

"Awkward," Hermione replied truthfully. "To say the least. He was adamant that he would be sleeping on the sofa, even after I reassured him that he wouldn't have to."

This surprised Ellen. "You told him he could sleep in the same bed as you?" she asked, flabbergasted.

"Well, not exactly," Hermione backtracked. "I just told him that he didn't have to sleep on the sofa."

"Hermione, to a boy, those two statements are one and the same. By telling him that he didn't have to sleep on the sofa, you were telling him to pretty much hop into bed with you. Was that really what you were wanting to advertise?"

Hermione's face was red with embarrassment. "I...wasn't trying to tell him that, no," she stuttered.

"But you do understand that that's what it must've sounded like to him, right?" Hermione nodded. "Hermione," Ellen continued, "I want you to be honest with me."

"Oh Merlin."

"I want to know how you truly feel about Harry."

"He's my best friend," Hermione replied quickly, as she looked behind them to see that Harry was still trailing behind.

"Bollocks. I mean, I know that he's your best friend. But I also know that you like him as more than that. The only thing is that I'm not

sure whether you haven't realized it or if you're just denying it. Be honest with me; what is it?"

Hermione stared at her mother silently for a moment while she mulled over her response. For her part, Ellen maintained eye contact with her daughter expectantly, consciously keeping one eye out for eavesdroppers.

"Yes," Hermione finally replied diplomatically.

"Yes what?"

"If you're trying to get me to admit I fancy Harry, then yes, I do. Are you happy now?"

"Yes," Ellen replied smugly. "But I'm more happy for you than anything else. But I do want to know: did you know this when you asked us to let him come on holiday with us?"

"I...I don't know. Does it really matter anyway? You got me to admit it, so you've done your job. Now what do you want to do about it?"

"Don't get so testy," Ellen warned. "All I was doing was taking an interest in my daughter's life, that's all, so forgive me for that. I just—" However, whatever Ellen was going to say was interrupted by the fact that Sirius, Remus, Richard, and Minerva had stopped at a crosswalk. "Well, that's my cue," she announced, slowing down to buy a few extra seconds. "We'll talk about this later, alright? For now, this conversation never happened at all."

"Thank Merlin for small favors," Hermione sighed in relief.

"But that means I won't treat you any differently than before..." Ellen trailed off mischievously as she stopped with the others. A moment later, Harry caught up with the group, his eyes still wandering and taking in the sights of Las Vegas.

The group crossed Tropicana Avenue, heading to the west. They passed The Tropicana resort and casino, which was directly across the street from both the MGM as well as Excalibur, and continued walking. Reaching another intersection, this time with Reno Avenue, they crossed, finding themselves across the street from a large obsidian pyramid.

"Now that looks cool," Harry said in awe of The Luxor.

"Maybe later, Harry," Hermione responded, looking in the opposite direction. "Because there's a pressing matter to attend to, remember? And it's sitting right behind you."

Harry turned around as they continued to walk, only to be greeted by another breathtaking sight. Directly ahead, several hundred meters away, was yet another massive spectacle. Rising from the desert almost as a mirage, was large, sparkling, sapphire building. Taking on the appearance of a large blue crystal ball, the building looked to be an enormous reflective navy cylinder with a large sphere perched atop it. Floating eerily within the crystal ball, mystically enhanced by a swirling mist, were two simple words: "The Merlin."

"Now that looks like magic," Sirius commented as he saw the floating words in the crystal ball.

"Maybe," Hermione replied. "I mean, even though this place looks like a muggle casino, Professor Snape said that it has magical aspects as well. It's within reason that some of the effects here really are magical, since muggles will just think they look cool or are some form of special effect."

Sirius nodded, accepting her explanation as he continued to take in the sight of the resort.

Stretching out before the building, which was set back about two hundred meters from the street, was a long, straight, concrete path, lined on either side with large gardens filled with artificial grass and native desert plants. Fully grown palm trees bordered the gardens on the outside, enclosing the path slightly and lending an air of intimacy to the walkway. About halfway down the path, the concrete grew into a large circular pad, bordered once more by artificial grass. In the center of this circular pad rested a large, round reflecting pool. However, on either side of the circular pad, two stone sculptures of hands, each holding what appeared to be a great stone wand, shot an arching jet of water over the circular pad and into the pool. By all appearances, it looked as though the wands themselves were casting some sort of magic.

"That's impressive," Ellen commented in amazement as she took in the sight before her. From their vantage point near the street, they could see various resort patrons milling about outside, walking under the watery archways, and emerging with nary a drop of water on them.

"Eh, I'm sure they're just using a very specific water pressure to make it do that," Hermione said, sounding unimpressed.

"Or they could be using magic," Remus suggested. "Severus did say that they used some magic here."

"Snivellus, you mean," Sirius corrected. "Remember Remus, as a Marauder, you are morally obligated to call the sniveling, whining little bat 'Snivellus.'"

"Yeah, yeah," Remus replied. "But my point still stands."

"I don't think it really matters," Ellen said. "I still think it looks neat."

"Yep," Richard agreed, adding nothing to the conversation. Yet he led the way toward the fountain, passing underneath the stream on the left side. As soon as he did so, he stopped and swayed for a moment before turning around slowly. "I feel...weird all of a sudden," he said uncertainly, putting his hand on his forehead. "Maybe there was something magic about this that we don't know about."

Hermione rushed forward, under the stream, to check on her father. As she skidded to a stop, she looked around curiously before scowling. "What're you on about, daddy? I don't feel anything!"

Richard staggered slightly before responding. "I dunno. I just feel like something is...like there's this pressure in my mind...some kind of suggestion...almost like a...GAH!" He lunged at Hermione, who shrieked and jumped back.

Richard broke out in raucous laughter as he bent over and clutched his knees for support.

"Daddy!" Hermione yelled in anger, glaring at him.

"Sorry Hermione," Richard began between laughing fits. "I just couldn't help it. You were so convinced that there was nothing magical about this fountain that I had to do something."

"Richard," Ellen scolded, "that was neither funny nor appropriate. You scared the daylights out of your daughter! Our daughter!"

Richard pulled Hermione into a one-armed hug. "Sorry Hermione," he said. "I just thought it would be fun to mess with somebody. Turns out that somebody was you. I'm sorry if I scared you though."

"Ugh," she grunted in response as she pulled away and strode purposefully toward the front door of The Merlin. The others picked up the pace to catch up, Harry jogging for a moment until he was next to Richard.

"You know," he began, "I thought it was kinda funny."

Richard smiled slightly at Harry. "Don't let her hear you say that, kid," he advised. "Sometimes it's best to hide things from women."

Harry snorted at his comment, but did not reply otherwise.

"I can definitely say that's true," Sirius opined from the other side of Richard as the approached the door.

"Well then, that certainly explains a lot," Harry said. "I mean, you haven't been able to hold down a steady relationship in...how long has it been Sirius?"

"Hey cub, don't you forget that I was stuck in that bloody prison for thirteen years, so you can't blame me for that. Besides, I'm still warming back up after that. But I will say I do have the whole 'fugitive' thing going for me. Women love bad boys."

"Yeah, you keep thinking that and let me know how it turns out, alright?" Harry responded snidely. "But don't blame me if I don't take your advice of follow in your footsteps. I think I'll do things my own way thank you very much."

"Your loss Harry."

Shaking his head but knowing full well that Sirius was only joking, Harry pulled the door open and stepped inside, following closely behind Hermione, Ellen, and Minerva, who had entered immediately ahead of him. As soon as he stepped inside, he was immediately overcome by a frigid blast from the resort's air conditioner, followed by the strong scent of air freshener as it wafted past him. Recalling the information imparted by Snape, Harry quickly remembered that it was not a perfume that he was smelling, but a vaporized anti-polyjuice potion. But once he had got past the initial smell, which seemed stronger than the one present at the MGM Grand, he took stock of his surroundings.

The group had entered a large, half-moon shaped reception area with the entire far wall taken up by a massive check-in desk. Deep blue marble tile covered the floor as the dark, cream-colored walls contrasted nicely with the gold chair rail and gold accented recesses. Bright white pillars seemed to be embedded in the walls at regular intervals, adding a sense of regality to the room. A large gold statue rose up from the center of the room, depicting a cloaked, hooded figure with a beard, hands apart as though conjuring a ball between them. Between the hands, a cloud of thick, pulsating smoke could be seen, rippling and changing shape constantly.

"Not bad," Harry commented to nobody in particular as he took in their surroundings.

"Not bad?" Sirius balked. "The place looks like a bloody palace. How do you get off saying 'not bad'?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't really have much to compare it to, do I? I've only been in the MGM, and that looked pretty neat too, so I can't compare it to much. Maybe if we went and visited every other casino on the Strip, then I'll be able to make a better judgment. But for now..."

"Alright, enough of that you two," Hermione interrupted, breaking off their conversation. "Honestly, can't you two have a real conversation instead of flinging insults at each other?"

"Well," Sirius began, "we have had a couple of normal conversations lately. Oddly enough though, they all tend to focus on the same subject." Harry glared at Sirius in an attempt to shut him up as the

Marauder eyed Hermione. The older man, not wanting to push his luck any further, wisely complied with Harry's wishes.

Seeing the look that they exchanged, Hermione did not press the subject any further. Instead, she glanced around the lobby, to find that, on either side of the half-moon shaped room, there was a large opening onto the casino floor.

"Where's the hotel itself?" she asked.

"I'm willing to wager that it's on the other side of the casino," her mother responded. "That way they can take advantage of everyone on the way to their rooms. From the looks of it," she added, as she peered into the casino, "the entire first floor of this place is the casino. I think that big crystal ball-thing we saw is the hotel itself, and the base is the casino and everything else like restaurants."

"Leave it to Malfoy to have a massive casino," Harry muttered as they made their way into the casino itself.

As they entered, they found that Ellen was, in fact, correct. The casino was, in essence, a large circle, with a small section near them blocked by a wall, which they now knew separated the casino from the lobby. To their left, they could see that the section of the wall closest to them was taken up by the cashier's cage, protected by gold bars that matched the accents on the walls. The overall décor of the casino was not drastically different from the lobby, with the exception of the fact that the blue marble floor had been replaced with similarly colored carpet. The only other difference was the lack of windows in the casino, creating a much darker atmosphere from the lobby.

Scattered about the casino floor were various pods of slot machines, but these tended to be clustered more toward the outside of the casino, almost like a concentric circle, mimicking the shape of the building. Within this ring of slot machines, several dozen tables could be seen, many of which were staffed by dealers who were occupied by a smattering of customers. These tables were, in general, arranged in groups of four, but were overall organized in a circle. At the very center of the casino they could see a low, circular wall that appeared to be similar to the one they had seen framing the poker room at the MGM. Harry could only assume that that was the case here as well.

"Where's the restroom?" Harry asked finally, scouring the room with his eyes, searching for a sign.

"Did you try right behind us?" Sirius asked, causing Harry to spin around, only to find a pair of hallways near the lobby, each of which with a sign to indicate the appropriate gender.

"Oh," Harry said pathetically, looking away in embarrassment.

"It's alright, Harry," Hermione said reassuringly, stepping up beside him. "You don't need to be embarrassed for not seeing the restroom. You should only be embarrassed if you couldn't find it in time." She chuckled at her own joke quietly, causing Ellen to chuckle as well.

"Sorry, Hermione," she said between laughs, "I'm not laughing with you, I'm laughing at you. You were the only one who laughed at that joke, which in and of itself was funny."

Hermione planted her hands on her hips and stared at the others. "Why is it that everyone else can make jokes that seem funny but I can't?" she asked.

"You just need practice dear," Ellen replied.

"Trust me," Sirius added, "by the time you've spent a week with Remus and I, you won't be able to look at anything in the world without making a crude joke."

"I'm not sure that's something to brag about," Richard said. "Maybe I should just get our return tickets now and forget about this whole thing."

"Or maybe not," Ellen answered for the others. "Honestly Richard, that wasn't funny either. Now, nobody make another joke for a while. I don't want us to get on a streak of bad or unfunny jokes, is that understood?"

She received uncertain nods from the others as she grinned in smug satisfaction. "Now," she continued, "I believe there was a reason we were looking for the restroom, right?"

Harry nodded in confirmation, not explicitly mentioning the fact that they were going to use the restrooms to change their appearances. The group split, with Minerva leading Hermione and Ellen into the women's restroom, while Harry, Sirius, Remus, and Richard entered the men's side.

"I didn't realize it would take all four of us to do this," Harry stated as they entered and found the restroom empty. "I mean, I thought I was toilet trained. I don't think I need this much supervision."

"Well aren't you just the veritable comedian lately, Harry?" Sirius observed. "Almost like you're trying to impress someone. But I've got news for you kiddo: she's not in here right now. So you can lay off the sarcastic jokes."

Harry stuck his tongue out at Sirius briefly in response.

"Now that's mature," his godfather said. "Well, we'd better get this over with before Harry here starts acting even younger. Maybe if we make him look older, he'll act older. Moony, would you do the honors?"

"With pleasure," the werewolf replied. "Now hold still Harry, otherwise I'm liable to transfigure into someone without any arms or something."

"That could be cool!" Harry said enthusiastically. "Then nobody would recognize me!"

"You also wouldn't be able to cast anything, so I would bin that idea now."

"Good point. Now get on with it Remus, I'm waiting. "I'm sure Minerva's done with Hermione by now."

"Yeah, yeah. But she does this for a living, so I wouldn't complain if I were you."

Remus pulled his wand out from the inside of his button-down floral-print shirt before pressing it against his chin in thought as he looked at Harry carefully. A few moments and several flicks of his wand later, Remus stood back and examined Harry once more.

"Looks good to me," Sirius commented.

"Sometimes I wonder about you lot," Richard muttered, having watched as Remus transformed Harry's appearance.

"Can I look in a mirror now?" Harry asked, still standing perfectly still.

"No, you aren't allowed to move. Ever," Sirius informed him, speaking for Remus.

"Nice try Sirius," Harry retorted as he made a move toward the large bank of mirrors that covered an entire wall. As he caught the first glimpse of his new self, Harry had to do a double-take. He now looked to be about two inches taller, and looked to have put one about an extra stone in weight, despite the fact that his cheekbones now seemed to be sharper. Even though his eyesight had not changed, he could no longer see his glasses, which Harry assumed Remus had disillusioned. His hair was now much shorter and dusty brown in color, and about two days worth of matching facial hair gave him a somewhat scraggly appearance. All told, Harry now appeared to be in his early twenties, just old enough to grant him legal access to the casino.

"Just one last thing to do," Remus announced. "I just need your passport, Harry. The muggle one."

"Right!" Harry exclaimed, snapping his fingers in remembrance. He pulled out the muggle passport from his pocket and handed it to Remus, who handed it back after another flick of his wand.

"There. Now you're legally over twenty one years old, at least in the muggle world," he said. "So you'll have to use that for your identification whenever you're asked. Now let's go see what Minerva cooked up."

"Wait," Harry interrupted, "what about you three? You can't expect to wander around a casino run by Death Eaters without being recognized, at least you two, Sirius and Remus, can't."

Sirius shrugged. "Might as well throw him a bone, eh Moony? I always do find it fun to try out a new appearance every now and then. Gives a bit of spice to life if I do say so myself."

"Whatever you say Padfoot," Remus granted skeptically as he took aim with his wand once more. A moment later, Sirius sported very short spiked black hair and was clean-shaven, making him appear to be no more than twenty five years old. Having turned his wand on himself, Remus now had a neatly trimmed goatee and narrow glasses, his clothes changed to a simple brown button-down shirt and slacks.

"Too big of a change will make it hard to remember if I ever need to do this again," Remus explained. "Now can we go see the others?" He received nods in response.

Remus led the way out of the restroom, having only spent less than two minutes inside, to find the three women standing outside waiting. Harry immediately recognized Minerva, whose hair had been lengthened and darkened into a sea of chestnut locks, similar to Hermione's normal hair, and Ellen, whose appearance had not changed. In addition to the changes in her hair, Minerva's face appeared to be about twenty years younger, sporting fewer wrinkles and changing her appearance dramatically.

Hermione, however, was with whom the biggest changes lay. Her hair, which normally reached down to the middle of her back, had been shortened dramatically, now only reaching her shoulders. It also appeared to be silkier, lacking the traditional bushiness that Harry, as well as the entire population of Hogwarts, had come to expect of her. The color too, had been darkened to a very dark shade of brown. Deviating from the theme of the color brown, Hermione's eyes had been changed from their normal color to a deep blue. Her face had been shortened somewhat, losing its slightly elongated appearance in favor of a rounder form.

"Looking good Harry," she commented as he walked out of the restroom, finishing with a wolf whistle.

"Thanks," he replied sheepishly. "And may I say that you're really killing that look yourself?"

"Well thank you good sir," she responded with mock seriousness. "I do think that the stubble is a nice touch too. The only problem is that these looks are temporary. We'll have to manually apply them every time we come in here from now on."

"Well, not necessarily," Minerva corrected. "I mean yes, you will have to undergo some form of transfiguration in order to disguise yourself, but it won't necessarily have to be this one. You can have whatever appearance you'd like, depending on the occasion. The new names, however, could probably stay."

"What'd you get?" Hermione asked Harry, referring to his new name.

He opened his passport, having not looked at it since it was changed, to find that he had retained his first name. However, his last name had been changed. "Harry Everton," he grimaced, not liking his new last name. "How about you?"

"Hannah Gordon," Hermione replied simply.

"Sorry, Hermione, but you don't really look like a Hannah. No offense or anything."

"Sure, whatever," she responded sarcastically. "But look at it this way: we can change our disguises, so maybe next time I'll look like a Hannah."

"We'll just have to wait and see," Harry said. "But now what? I'm sorry to say I have no idea what to do next. What're we here to accomplish today?"

"And here I thought that you and Hermione had some grand plan for what to do when you tried to rush us out this morning," Richard teased.

"Don't look at me like I'm the one who's supposed to come up with everything!" Harry protested. "I'm only fifteen...almost sixteen for Merlin's sake!"

"Um, Harry," Hermione began, "you might wanna watch the use of the word 'Merlin.' We don't wanna attract attention."

"True," he admitted, "but remember, that is the name of the hotel, so it might not be too out of place."

"And exactly how often do you expect muggles to go around swearing in the name of Merlin?" she pointed out. "Just something to consider. But anyway, since you asked, I think we should at least

take a look around and see what we can find out. I don't think we'll be able to see anything behind the scenes, but at the very least we can see what security is like here just in case we do need to get into the back at some point."

"That's my daughter," Richard announced proudly, "always coming up with the brilliant solutions to every problem. She gets it from me, you know."

"Sometimes it's really difficult to see though," Ellen retorted.

"We're not just gonna wander around as a big group are we? That'd attract too much attention, wouldn't it?" Harry asked.

"Yep," Sirius responded. "Which is why I'm gonna park myself at one of those slot machines over there and have at it. Oh, and I'll keep an eye out for anything worthwhile too." He took off toward the nearest bank of slot machines, keen on fulfilling his plan.

"I never should have explained slot machines this morning," Richard complained. Harry and Hermione shared a glance, not remembering that conversation. But they concluded that it had transpired before they had arrived for breakfast.

"Oh well then," Harry said. "I'll just be over here at one of these tables, trying desperately not to lose too much money. I'll let you know if I find anything."

"Alone, Harry?" Hermione asked uncertainly. "Are you sure about this?"

"Remember, I spent all night on my computer, reading up on casino games, among other things. Blackjack seemed simple enough, so I should be able to hold my own on that."

"If you're sure..." she trailed off.

"I am," he replied confidently as he left the group and strode toward the nearest blackjack table.

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As Harry approached the various tables, he noticed that each table had a small sign on it, denoting the minimum bet that must be placed at that table, as well as the game that could be played there. However, Harry wasn't paying too much attention to that, and was instead more concerned with finding a table with a good vantage point of a door off of the casino floor.

Finally, after a few moments of wandering around, Harry finally saw an empty blackjack table with a good view of a door to the back of the house. The fact that the minimum bet at the table was only ten dollars was an extra bonus. Head down, Harry took a seat on one of the stools surrounding the table and examined the table closely.

"Can I see your I.D.?" a voice asked in a deep southern American accent, startling Harry out of his observation.

Harry looked up, getting a good look at the dealer for the first time. The first thing he noticed were the kind, blue, aged eyes of his dealer, before Harry took in the rest of his appearance. The dealer was a portly older man, perhaps in his late sixties, with pure white hair and a neat white mustache. His full head of hair was combed over smartly, belying the care the older man took in his appearance. His deep blue eyes examined Harry carefully from behind his round, wire-framed spectacles, sizing up Harry and his age.

"Sure," Harry answered tentatively, reaching into his pocket for his British passport. He handed it to the dealer. "Here you go..." he searched the man's uniform for his name, and finally found it. "Al from Mobile, Al."

"That's Alabama, son," Al corrected as he examined Harry's modified passport. "Sorry, Harry," he amended. "Not from around here, are ya Harry?" he asked as he handed the passport back to Harry.

"Nope," Harry replied. "You know, normally I wouldn't talk to strangers," he began, eliciting a snort from Al, "but in this case I'll make an exception."

"Excellent!" Al declared. "So you wanna play or what? Or lemme put this another way: have you ever played blackjack before?"

Harry shook his head in the negative. "Nope, but I kinda have an idea about the game. So how do I start?"

Al gave Harry a patronizing smile. "Well, how much do you wanna play? You have to decide on that first, and then we can start. Once you're ready, just hand me however much you wanna play with and I'll give you the chips."

Harry nodded in acceptance of those instructions before pulling out his wallet. He fingered through the bills inside for a moment before pulling out a fifty dollar bill and placing it on the table. Al quirked an eyebrow slightly before sliding the bill towards himself and slipping it into a small slot in the table. He then issued Harry fifty dollars in chips.

"Now, the first thing you need to do is place your bet. The minimum at this table is ten dollars, and the maximum is ten thousand. But I don't really think we'll have a problem with that part. You put the chips you want to bet here," he said, tapping a spot on the table reserved for chips that had been bet. "Then I'll deal. But first you need to bet."

Harry pondered his bet for a moment before settling on the minimum of ten dollars. He placed a ten dollar chip in the small white box that was painted onto the table and waited.

"Great!" Al said. "Now, depending on where you play, there are different rules for blackjack. Here, at least, you can touch the cards, since I'm dealing from a single deck. At most other properties, you can't since they use a shoe, and as a result, the dealer will place all of the cards face up. But since you can touch the cards here, we let you hold them and keep them face down. Understand?"

Harry nodded, understanding completely. It wasn't too difficult to understand.

"So let's get started, shall we?" Al asked as he began to deal. He dealt a card to Harry and then to himself, before repeating, this time dealing face up. Harry peeked at his overturned card to find that it was the eight of clubs which, added to his king of hearts, would equal eighteen.

"Um, stay," he decided.

Al nodded before flipping his card over to reveal that he had been dealt a pair of tens. He pulled Harry's bet towards him and placed it in his rack of chips as Harry pushed forward another ten dollars for another hand.

"Do you know about the hand signals, Harry?" Al asked, earning a shake of his customer's head in response. "To stay, for example, you could just wave your hand just above the table like this." Al demonstrated the traditional hand motion. "For a hit, you could scratch the table with the tip of your fingers, like this." He then showed Harry that signal as well. "Those are two of the basic ones. You don't really have to use them, but I see enough beginners use them just to impress people, so I thought I'd pass them along."

As Al dealt for the second time, Harry began to look around the casino floor, paying close attention to the door on the wall behind Al. Just as Al finished dealing, Harry noticed a resort employee slide a card, which was attached to their waist via a small cord, through a card reader next to the door. They then pulled the door open and disappeared.

"Harry?" Al asked, disturbing Harry from his observations. He nodded toward the table, reminding Harry of the game at hand.

"Oh, right," Harry replied sheepishly. "Sorry, I got distracted for a minute."

"It's alright, happens all the time," Al reassured him.

Harry glanced down at his cards once more to find a three and a queen, giving him a total of thirteen.

"Hit me," he said, using the terms he remembered from his online research.

With a nod, Al slid another card over to Harry, this time, a seven, giving Harry a total of twenty.

"Stay," he announced more confidently than last hand. Al, for his part, flipped his overturned card over to find that he had a total of fourteen between his two cards. Dealing himself another card, Al found himself with an eight, giving himself a total of twenty-two.

After collecting the cards, Al pulled a ten dollar chip out of his rack and gave it to Harry, who left his initial ten dollars on the table for the next hand.

Harry's luck continued in this fashion for the next several hands, with him losing some and winning some games. However, his attention was not entirely on the game itself, but on the background operations of the casino. On occasion, he could see a navy clad security guard wander the floor of the casino, sometimes using the door behind Al to leave the floor. Along the ceiling, Harry could see numerous security cameras, strategically positioned above every set of tables and slot machines.

Finally, amidst his distraction, Harry noticed that he had reached his final chip. He looked up at Al who was waiting for his bet patiently, shuffling the deck idly. Lacking hesitation due to the amount of money still left in his wallet, Harry pushed his final chip forward into the white box and waited for Al to deal.

As soon as Al dealt, Harry noticed that he had been dealt a jack in addition to his overturned card. Tentatively flipping it over, he found it to be an ace, giving him a blackjack. Al noticed this and nodded.

"Look like your luck might be turnin' around," he said as he handed Harry fifteen dollars in chips. Al slid the winnings over to Harry, pushing his initial bet out of the box.

Deciding to leave things as they were, Harry pulled the ten dollar chip back along with the extra five dollars, and played the ten dollar chip he had won, having completely forgotten that the Internet had suggested that he tip the dealer when he received a blackjack. The next hand, however, he busted, losing the ten dollars he had won before.

Once again, Harry put forward the original ten dollar chip, and once again, he won the hand with an instant blackjack.

"Looks like that might be your lucky chip, Harry," Al said as he paid out Harry's winnings. "So, are you here for vacation or what? I noticed you had some funny British accent and all."

Harry nodded as Al dealt again, having bet his 'lucky chip' once more. "Yeah, I'm here with some friends and family on a little holiday. We were originally going to Florida, but changed to here at the last minute."

"Oh? Why's that?" Al asked as Harry looked at his cards.

"My friend's dad always wanted to come here, so we just made the change. Hit me."

Al did as Harry requested, dealing Harry the five of diamonds, bringing Harry's total to nineteen.

"Stay," he said, satisfied with his total. This time, however, he employed the hand motion that Al had taught him, in addition to verbalizing his decision.

Al flipped his cards over to see an ace and a four. Al dealt himself another card, this time the six of hearts, giving himself an even twenty-one.

"Ah, tough luck Harry," he sympathized as he collected Harry's chip from the table. "How's about one more hand to see if you can win back your lucky chip?"

Harry shrugged and pushed forward the two five dollar chips he had won from his two blackjacks. Dealing one more time, Al gave Harry a pair of nines, for a total of eighteen. Even though he felt that his total was not high enough to ensure a win, Harry knew that the odds were against him if he requested another card.

"Stay," he said, waving off any additional cards.

With a nod, Al examined his own cards carefully. "Looks like your lucky chip doesn't want to leave you, Harry," he announced, flipping his cards over to reveal an eight and a nine for a total of seventeen. After collecting the cards, he pulled the same ten dollar chip that had won a few games for Harry out of the rack and twirled it around in his fingers for a moment playfully. Finally, he handed it to Harry. "Here ya go, sport," he said.

Harry took the chip and stood from the table. "You know, I think I'm gonna call it quits before I lose everything," he stated.

"Your call, Harry," Al said understandingly. "If you wanna cash in those chips, you can go over to the cashier's cage over there." He motioned to the cage that Harry had seen when he entered the casino. "But you know what? I almost think you should hold onto your lucky chip. After all, it is lucky, remember? You never know what it'll come in handy."

Harry looked at him skeptically, but nodded all the same as he pocketed both the 'lucky chip' and the pair of five dollar chips as well.

As he did so, Al pulled a well worn, ornate silver pocket watch from the pocket on his burgundy vest and looked at it. "Perfect timing anyway," he said. "It's about time for my break." He put the watch back in his pocket and moved to lock the rack of chips on the table.

"That's a nice watch," Harry commented honestly.

"Thanks Harry. It was actually a Christmas gift from my father-in-law years ago. Well, actually, he wasn't my father-in-law at the time, which made the gift even more special. He said it was his grandfather's, which really made it mean a lot that he trusted me with it, considering the fact that I wasn't even married to his daughter. In fact, he hardly even knew me at the time."

"How long ago was that?" Harry asked.

"Oh, gosh Harry," Al began. "I don't even want to think about when he gave it to me. Once you get old enough, everything blurs together, so it's not even worth thinking about. For me, time has taken on a completely different meaning as a result."

Harry nodded in understanding as he pushed the stool back into the table.

"Anyway, have fun on your trip, Harry," Al said sincerely. "And maybe I'll see you around, alright?"

Harry nodded once more as he turned and left the table, hands in his pockets fingering the chips he had won. However, as he played with the chips, he felt something off. One of the chips felt slightly different from the others. He pulled out all three in one handful and examined them closely as he walked toward the cashier's cage.

Initially, the chips all looked identical, albeit with two of them being of one color and the third of another to denote their worth. He slowly took each one into his free hand to look at it more closely, only to find that the two five dollar chips were completely normal. So he placed them into his other front pocket before examining the final chip, his 'lucky chip.'

Upon first inspection, he could not see anything out of the ordinary with this chip. However, as he flipped it over, he found out what felt so different. Attached to the underside of the chip was a small, tightly folded square piece of paper.

Peeling the paper away and tucking the chip into his pocket with the others, Harry unfolded the paper to find a single word written upon it.

"Horcrux," he muttered, reading the word aloud.

Despite the word meaning nothing to him, he folded the note back up and put it in his pocket as he scanned the casino floor for the others. Almost immediately, his eyes spotted Minerva McGonagall, who was only a few meters away on a slot machine. Harry hurried over to her and waited a moment for her to finish her current spin.

After watching her win nothing, Harry cleared his throat audibly, gaining her attention.

"Yes, Harry?" she asked, looking up from the screen.

"Um," he began, scratching the back of his head. "I just finished playing blackjack and was taking my chips over to cash them out when I found a note stuck to the back of one of the chips."

"And?" she asked expectantly.

"Well," he started, fishing around in his pocket for the paper for a moment before finally finding it. "Here, you can read it for yourself." He handed the paper over to his professor and waited for her to read it.

Minerva unfolded the paper and scanned it quickly. As she finished, the color instantly drained from her face.

"What?" Harry asked. "What is it?"

Minerva quickly stood from her seat and checked to make sure she had not left anything behind. "I can't be certain," she said. "I have no idea what this has to do with anything we're doing here, but I will say this: whenever this word is involved, there is great evil afoot."

"Huh?"

"Come on," she said urgently, "let's find the others. If this has anything to do with why we're here, then we may have a bigger problem than we originally thought."

End of Chapter 8

A/N: And so ends chapter 8. Now, I know many of you, if not most of you, knew from the very beginning that the object in question in this story would be a horcrux. I really didn't make any secret of that fact, as most of us know canon and could figure it out easily. The characters in the story, however, had no idea what the object could have been, hence the reveal in this chapter. The source of this nugget of information will be dealt with in the next chapter, as the group investigates the possibility that the object they are looking for is really a horcrux. I do want to talk briefly about horcruxes here, however. I'm not a big fan of them in general. I made what I now consider to be a mistake when I included them in The Divine Plan, due to the fact that it can get quite messy trying to keep track of them all, especially for a novice writer. I won't make that same mistake again. In my view, horcruxes exist mainly as the Macguffin for the seventh book, and serve as little else. Granted, all stories need a Macguffin, or plot device, but I think it was taken a bit far in DH. As a result, while I am using a horcrux as a major plot device in this story, there will not be seven of them in this universe. Outside of the diary, which was destroyed before this story, and the one I'm using in this story, I will not include any further horcruxes. I don't really subscribe to the idea that Harry was a horcrux, at least in this story. There are too many plot holes for it to make sense for me, at least with the information given in canon. That is, of course, my opinion. However, I do have a story idea (that I may use in the future) that requires that Harry is a horcrux. So I won't rule out that possibility in the future.

Another thing I want to mention is the concept of the plot twist, or lack thereof. There may be some elements of this story (actually,

there will be and have been), that I may not explicitly reveal, but are obvious to some readers. The horcrux issue is an example of this. Another example of this occurs in this chapter. I will not say what it is, for those readers who may not have guessed it, but I am making no attempt at hiding some elements of the story. In fact, it may be more rewarding in the long run for some readers to guess at the various 'hidden' elements, as they are slowly revealed throughout the series.

Also, I want to reiterate the fact that this story is taking place over a very short time. The bulk of this story is only a few days long. That is not enough time, in my opinion, for Harry and Hermione to quickly change their relationship before the end of the story. But fear not, Harmony fans, there will be a payoff at the end of the story, as well as little moments scattered around during the course of the story.

I also want to mention that, like all other authors, I am not perfect. There will be things that I do not notice or think of while writing the story. Reviewers, on the other hand, have a different perspective of the story, and can sometimes come up with new ideas for the story. I do not begrudge this fact, and have welcomed it in the past by changing some points in the story. However, I did want to point that out. I also want to ask about redundancy. I read every review for my stories, and reply to as many as I can, in an attempt to improve my writing. One review mentioned that my writing can sometimes include redundancies. This is the kind of constructive criticism I welcome. However, I am unaware of where these redundancies may occur, so I am asking for your help. If you notice any, please let me know so that I can work to avoid them in the future.

Chapter Title Hint: Now that we know that the main plot driver of this story is a horcrux, the characters are going to have to discuss it in the next chapter. As a result, the title of the next chapter will reflect this fact. The only hint I'll provide is this: what is the main purpose of a horcrux? What is it intended to do? Search for a Queen song that deals with this topic, and you'll have found the title of chapter 9.

I just want to offer congratulations to the following reviewers for correctly guessing the title of this chapter: Imagine-Unique-Name-Here, pfeil, acam, luvsanime02, and GodricG89. Excellent work, all of you!

Thank you again for reading, and I hope you enjoyed the most recent installment of Stealing Time. If you did, please let me, and the rest of the world, know by posting a review. I'll see you again soon with chapter 9.

Chapter 9

Who Wants to Live Forever?

July 25, 2011

12:10 PM

"What's so important that we had to rush back here?" Richard asked as he closed the door to Minerva McGonagall's hotel room, effectively sealing the entire group inside and ensuring their privacy. Minerva had refused to answer any questions on the trip back to The Signature, instead only urging the others to leave The Merlin without an explanation. However, as he finished speaking, there was a knock at the door.

"That would be Severus," Minerva explained. "I sent him a patronus telling him he needed to join us. Mr. Granger, if you'd be so kind?"

Richard nodded and answered the door to allow the ebony-clad potions professor into the room, before closing the door once again behind him.

"Now," Snape began, "I am curious what the emergency is. All I was told was that I had to come here immediately." He remained standing as Richard sat on the sofa next to his wife.

"I do apologize, Severus," Minerva said impatiently. "I simply deemed it irresponsible to mention the situation in my patronus. But I'll let Harry here explain what happened."

"Merlin help us," Snape muttered as he turned his attention to Harry.

"Anyway," Harry began, ignoring Snape's comment, "I was playing blackjack at one of the tables, as you all know," he nodded to everyone beside Snape, "and watching parts of the casino floor to sort of get a lay of the land. I wasn't paying too much attention to the game, instead I was focusing on other things, such as security measures. Anyway, I kept playing, winning here and losing there. Eventually, I got down to my last two chips and won, winning back a chip that the dealer had called my 'lucky chip,' since I tended to win whenever I bet it. I decided to call it quits at that point and left the table. As I left, the dealer, Al, told me that since it was my lucky chip,

I might not want to cash it in, but instead hold onto it. He said that I couldn't be sure when it'd come in handy again. So as I was leaving, I realized that one of the chips in my pocket felt different. I looked at my 'lucky chip' and found a piece of paper stuck to it. I opened it up to find a single word: horcrux."

"And that's why I called you here, Severus," Minerva said. "If this is true, this is no longer a trivial matter to say the least."

"What's the big deal about this horcrux thing?" Harry asked. "What is it, anyway?" He glanced at Hermione, who shrugged. "You mean you don't know either?" he asked her.

"I haven't seen the word come up in any of my readings," she replied.

"And for good reason, Hermione," Minerva explained. "Any writings about horcruxes have been made illegal by the Ministry. While you may be able to find some sparse information in one of those shady bookstores in Knockturn Alley, most of the more reputable writings have been confiscated and stored in the Department of Mysteries, only to be seen by the Unspeakables."

"Alright..." Hermione began, "so what are they?"

Minerva turned to Snape. "Severus, perhaps you would be the better choice to explain them. You are, after all, better versed in the Dark Arts than I."

Snape nodded and crossed his arms as he leaned against the wall. "A horcrux is, for lack of a better term, the key to immortality. But, like drinking the blood of a unicorn, this immortality is only a pale shadow of traditional life. In essence, in order to create a horcrux, a witch or wizard must commit the most evil act possible: murder. Then, through a sadistic ritual at the scene of the murder, they are able to split their own soul and store it inside of a vessel of some sort. Potter, you may remember that diary of the Dark Lord's during your second year? I am confident, as is the Headmaster, that that was a horcrux. By destroying it, you inadvertently destroyed a piece of his soul, thereby removing one strand that had tenuously connected him to immortality."

"Well that's just great," Harry muttered. "So we have another one on our hands here then?"

"Not necessarily, Potter," Snape sneered. "While I do not know of this 'Al' of whom you spoke, I can already surmise that his credibility is dubious at best. I know your impetuous Gryffindor personality would love to jump to conclusions without first considering the ramifications, however that would not be in our best interests."

"What can we do then?" Sirius asked. "If there really is any truth to this, the new can't let the thing sit there! We have to do something about it!"

"While normally I would jump at the chance to disagree with Black here," Snape began, "he is correct. However, we have no proof that this note is correct, or that it is even referring to the object being stored in the vault of The Merlin. It is completely possible that this note was meant for an entirely different purpose, or was meant as either a decoy or a trap. We cannot be certain. All we know for sure is that this 'Al' was working in a casino operated by Lucius Malfoy. Therefore, his credibility is already in question."

"Then how can we be certain?" Harry asked.

"Only Malfoy would know for certain," Minerva interjected. "Severus, can you force the information out of him?"

Snape gave her a rare smile, albeit a sadistic one. "Minerva, I don't believe that having me force information out of him would be the most...productive option. He would be little more than a mental vegetable when I was through with him. However, I might be able to get more information out of him by other means."

"You know what I meant Severus Snape," Minerva said sarcastically. "So tell me, can you do it?"

Snape nodded curtly without speaking.

"I will say this," Minerva continued, "it does make sense for all of this to actually be the case. Think about it. What would be the first thing that you would hide if you thought somebody could read your mind?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Of course it would be a piece of your soul. Granted, we have no evidence that You-Know-Who is utilizing another horcrux, but the point still stands."

"So then what happens if it turns out to be real?" Hermione asked.

"Simple," Harry responded, still maintaining eye contact with Snape, "we steal it."

"I think that's out of the question, Harry," Remus interjected, eliciting a small smile from Snape. "We don't even know what kind of security that place has. There's no way we're equipped to steal anything. This was supposed to be a survey trip only."

"I personally think we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves here," Ellen opined. "Once again, we don't even know if we can trust this information. Why don't we find out a bit more about the whole situation before deciding what to do?"

"Not a bad idea," Richard agreed. "But at the same time, what can we really do while we wait for...Professor Snape here to find out more?"

"I for one," Sirius began, "wouldn't mind hitting the casino downstairs. Merlin knows I didn't get to spend enough time frivolously wasting money at The Merlin."

"If that is the way you want to spend your time," Minerva offered, trying to make Sirius feel guilty. It did not work, as Sirius showed no remorse. "However, I believe Harry here should go back and confront Al about the entire situation and try and find out more. Severus, you should see what you can find out from your end." Snape nodded and exited the room, intent on beginning his mission. "I also personally think that we should see what we can see regarding the back of the house. I know we saw the doors and guards on the floor when we were there earlier. But that's about it. It'll do us no good to figure out that we have to get back there if we don't know how."

"Well, I did see that they were using keycards," Harry informed them. "That's a start at least."

"Indeed it is, Harry. But it's not enough to know that we would need a keycard to get into the back. We need to know who has them, where the doors lead, and other things too. We need to make another trip there, full stop."

"But is there really a point?" Ellen asked. "We already have a good idea about all of that already. Couldn't we use the time to see if we can find a way to get into the back?"

Minerva nodded. "We could do that as well. I am not discounting any possibilities. I simply believe we need to scout the property more and that that would be an excellent use of our time. Once we leave, of course. It's not imperative that we leave immediately, but I do feel that we should return to The Merlin soon."

"Are you sure you don't wanna come with us, Sirius?" Harry asked. "We could really use your help."

"He's right," Remus agreed. "I for one am gonna go with Harry to find this 'Al' character. You should come along too."

"If you lot are trying to guilt me into coming with you," Sirius began, "I can tell you right now that it will not work. I am going down to the casino to play the slots, and that's final."

In the end, the group decided to wait at least an hour before departing for The Merlin, in order to allow for some relaxation time. The various members of the party retired to their respective rooms, intent on making the most of the time they had been given. In this vein, Harry and Hermione found themselves in their room, with Harry seated on the sofa with his computer on his lap.

Hermione, emerging from the bathroom, took one look at him and shook her head. "You're obsessed with that thing, you know?" she pointed out.

"Nah," Harry replied, not looking away from his screen, "I'm just killing time."

"There're better ways of killing time, like reading a good book," she told him.

"And I could read those books on my computer if I wanted to."

Realizing he was intent on staying on his computer, Hermione headed for the door to her room. "Then I'm gonna kill the time too. I got up too early this morning, so I'm gonna kip out for a bit while we have the time."

Upon hearing this, Harry looked up from the screen. "Oh," he said sheepishly. "I didn't mean to drive you away--"

"You weren't," Hermione reassured him. "I really am tired. Since we've got an hour, I might as well take advantage of it while I can, right?"

Harry shrugged noncommittally. "I guess," he admitted. "Sweet dreams then."

Hermione shot him a grateful look before disappearing into her bedroom and closing the door.

'Sweet dreams?' Harry ridiculed himself. What the hell was that? That sounds like something Ellen would tell her, not me. I must've sounded like a bloody pansy or something with that, so she must be in there laughing at me by now. Way to go, Mr. Smooth. Tripping over your own tongue doesn't bode well for your friendship. I've always been able to talk to her just fine, so what's she gonna think if I'm acting barmy all of a sudden?

However, Harry's self-deprecation was interrupted by a soft knock at the door. Placing his computer to the side, Harry rose and looked at the door to Hermione's room as he went to answer the door. Finding that Hermione's door remained closed, Harry concluded that she was either already asleep, or simply did not care who was at the door.

Harry opened the door to find Ellen standing in the hall outside. "Hi Harry," she said, peering over his shoulder. "Where's Hermione? I thought I saw her leave with you?"

"Yeah, she did," he replied. "But she's in the other room sleeping...or at least that's what she said. Something about getting up early this morning or something like that."

"Oh," Ellen replied. "I just wanted to finish a conversation I started with her earlier."

"Did you want me to wake her up?"

"No, that's alright, Harry. I don't think she'd really appreciate that, especially considering the fact that she didn't seem too excited about the conversation this morning."

"Oh."

"But, it does give me a chance to chat with you. I haven't really had a chance to really talk with you since we met, and I'm admittedly curious to see what it is Hermione sees in you."

"Sees in me?" Harry asked, trying to guide the conversation toward answering the question that had been bothering him for weeks.

"Yeah. Hermione talks about you all the time. And since you're her best friend, I just want to see why."

"Oh," he said for the second time, somewhat deflated.

"So, wanna take a walk? I hardly think we should talk in here, what with Hermione in just in the other room."

Glancing behind himself to see that Hermione's door still had not changed, Harry shrugged, giving in to Ellen's suggestion. "Sure," he said in an unsure tone.

"Great!" Ellen exclaimed, moving aside to let Harry exit the room. He followed behind her, patting his pocket to make sure he was carrying his wallet and, in turn, his key to the room.

"So what'd you want to know?" Harry asked tentatively as they walked down the hall.

"Oh, Harry, I'm not trying to find out one thing in particular. I just wanted to get to know you better. You've been friends with Hermione for years, but this holiday is really the first chance Richard or I have had to get to know you. The fact that you've been friends with Hermione for this long tells me that you'll be in her life for a long time to come, so it only makes sense that I learn a bit about you. Lord knows that we don't get to be involved in Hermione's life in the magical world as much as we'd like, so this seems like a good place to start."

"Where should I start?" he asked. However, as soon as he asked, Harry remembered Hermione's warning from a few days before, when she had warned him against divulging too much information to Ellen. "Granted, I do have to keep in mind the fact that Hermione told me not to tell you too much," he added in a joking tone, even though he was completely serious.

"She's just being protective," Ellen explained. "She has this crazy notion that I'm out to embarrass her at every turn, when nothing could be further from the truth. However, sometimes as a parent, you realize that being completely serious with your children is not always best. I hope you get a chance to understand this, Harry. In our case, since Richard and I are now only part of Hermione's life for a few months every year, we have to make the most of it, which means trying to enjoy our time with her. If that involves some good-natured ribbing, then so be it."

Harry pressed the button for the elevator and stepped back slightly to wait for it. "As much as it shouldn't make sense to me at my age, that actually does make a lot of sense. I've only had Hermione's word for it until now, but she talks about how you poke fun at her from time to time. I don't know that she's really upset about it, just that she thinks it can get annoying from time to time."

"And that's part of the problem. As a parent, there is really a fine line to walk with your children. If I were to walk up to Hermione and ask her point-blank how her love life, for instance, was going, she would naturally be upset with me, even though I have only the most noble of intentions." Harry avoided her gaze at her last statement. "Now, I only have experience raising one teenager, so I can't speak for all of them, but my experience with Hermione tells me that, even when I joke with her, it's annoying. So it can be quite difficult for a parent to relate to their children as teenagers. And that's why I'm coming to you. I know you're a teenager too, but I'm hoping I can learn a bit about the world my daughter lives in, as well as a bit about her friends. Richard wants to know too, but I told him not to come, as he sometimes tends to make things worse."

"How so?" Harry asked as they stepped into the elevator.

"Harry, sometimes Richard can be a bit...brusque. This can be especially true when it comes to Hermione's associations. While he won't admit it, I think he tends to see some of her friends as

competitors for Hermione's affections, platonic or otherwise." Ellen seemed to be speaking slowly as she chose her words carefully, in an attempt to not reveal Hermione's true feelings. Harry did not pick up on her change in delivery. "But his intentions are noble, despite how they may be conveyed. But enough about him, what about you? What was your life like before you started Hogwarts?"

Harry did not respond immediately as he weighed several different responses. He was reluctant to tell her the truth, however her explanation about her desire to know Hermione better swayed him toward responding honestly. "Not brilliant," he admitted. "My Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon aren't very fond of anything magical, and they made that very clear as I was growing up. Anything magical was discouraged, from speaking about it, to watching films about it. The worst part is, as I'm sure you know, magical children perform accidental magic from time to time." Ellen nodded, remembering various incidents with Hermione. "I, however, was punished every time that happened."

"What do you mean, punished?" Ellen asked warily as the doors of the elevator opened to the first floor lobby. She instantly pressed the button to close the doors again, ensuring their privacy.

Harry chose his words carefully. "Locked in my...room, or sent away without supper...or something like that."

"Something like that? What does that mean, Harry? Did your aunt and uncle resort to corporal punishment?"

"Corporal punishment?" Harry asked in confusion. "What's that?"

As Harry finished speaking, the elevator doors opened to reveal a group of five young college students, laughing loudly amongst themselves as they casually took swigs from the oversized drinks that they were carrying.

Ignoring them, Ellen pressed the button for the top floor of the tower and waited for the door to close. The partiers had never noticed that their elevator had arrived.

"Corporal punishment," she began as the elevator began to move, "is physical punishment. I don't really need to explain it further than that. I know it's not really any of my business, and you can refuse to

answer me if you want, but I'm understandably curious. Hermione's always said that your childhood wasn't the best, but I don't think that even she knows much about it. So I'll just ask again: did your aunt and uncle use corporal punishment on you, Harry?"

Harry stared at the display next to the elevator door as it slowly counted the floors. "Yeah," he admitted. "But it wasn't that bad," he added quickly. "It's not like they would beat me! I would sometimes get a slapping or something like that. More often, though, I was just thrown in my cupboard...bedroom for punishment."

"Your what?" Ellen asked suspiciously.

"Bedroom," Harry replied quickly, not making eye contact.

"You're a terrible liar, Harry," Ellen scolded. "Hermione's told me that much at least. Now, what did you mean to say?"

"Bedroom," he said defiantly.

Ellen sighed. She should have expected this. Even though she was medically trained, part of her doctoral education had been in psychology, due to the number of nervous children and adults that visited medical professionals. It only made sense to take a few classes on the subject in order to prepare her for her future in the dental field. That Harry was closing up on her was to be expected, especially since she was pushing so hard. If she wanted to keep the conversation alive, she would have to back off and let him keep some secrets.

"Alright then, Harry, I'm not gonna press it. I thought you said 'cupboard,' but it doesn't really matter. In fact, I don't think we really need to talk about your aunt and uncle anymore, do you?" Harry shook his head. "Then how about we move onto bigger and better things. Hermione told us that you and that Weasley boy saved her from a troll in your first year, and that's how you became friends. How'd that happen? She's only told us bits and pieces of the story, since when she came home, she mainly told us about her classes, and only gave Richard and I the vaguest information about her adventures." As she spoke, Ellen pressed the button to return to the lobby of the hotel, since the conversation was no longer in dangerous territory.

"Well, I don't want to make him sound like a right berk, but Ron said something mean to Hermione, which sent her into a right state. She spent the rest of the day in the girls' lavatory crying, and didn't know that there was a troll loose in the school. So when we found out, Ron and I decided to go and find her before the troll did."

"You and Ron had the idea Harry, or just you?"

"It was my idea," he admitted, "but Ron went along with it. We got to her just as the troll did, so we kinda had to fight the troll. I ended up jumping on its back, but Ron eventually levitated its club and used it to knock the troll out. So really, Ron was the one who saved Hermione."

"But would he have gone if it weren't for your suggestion?" Ellen challenged.

"Probably not," Harry replied. "But he went along anyway. Ron's a good friend, and he's shown it over and over again."

"I'm not doubting that, Harry. I know that he can be a good friend, Hermione's said as much. But based on some of the things she's said, and on what you just told me, I almost think that he doesn't think things through all the way. In other words, he leaps before he looks."

"That's kinda true, but at the same time, it's not. Ron's a great strategist, as hard as that may be for you to believe. He can whip me at chess any day of the week, and he's even been known to beat Hermione, at least when she plays with him. I almost think he just has a short temper that can get the better of him sometimes. And those instances just happen to occur at the worst possible times."

Ellen shook her head good-naturedly. "I'm sorry, Harry. He may be a good strategist, but he doesn't seem like he thinks things through."

"That can be true from time to time. But he is willing to help out whenever he can too. Later that year, he sacrificed himself in a giant chess game so that Hermione and I could move forward through what was, basically, a series of dangerous puzzles."

Ellen nodded. "Hm, I think Hermione told us a bit about that. Something about the...what was it called? Philosopher's Stone?"

"Yeah, that's it," Harry replied as the elevator doors opened to the empty lobby. The pair stepped out of the cramped box and began to walk toward the MGM casino. "One of the security measures before the Stone was a giant chess game with living pieces that would actually attack you. At the end of the game, based on where the pieces were, one of us had to sacrifice ourselves. Ron chose to do that. So you can't really say he thinks only of himself."

"That's not what I was trying to say, Harry. But no matter. Anyway, it sounds like you three have had all kinds of little adventures throughout the years."

"Well...not really," Harry admitted. "Ever since the end of our second year, we haven't had too many adventures that involved all three of us. I mean, there was the time when we found Sirius for the first time, but Ron was injured during that little episode. Hermione and I went back in time later that night in order to save Sirius, while Ron was stuck in the hospital wing. At the end of the night, Hermione and I rode Buckbeak...the hippogriff, which was great fun. Oh, and Sirius rode with us too."

"Right. I think Hermione mentioned something about really enjoying being able to spend that time with you without Ron being around to cock about."

"Yeah, it was pretty nice," Harry said dazedly. "I almost think that Ron found out about that somehow too. I know I never told him about it, but he seemed really suspicious of me the next year when we went back to school. For example, he didn't believe me, at least at first, when I told him that I didn't put my name in the Goblet."

"But Hermione did," Ellen finished for him.

"Yeah...she did. She was the only one, really. I mean, Ron came around eventually, and so did a few others by the beginning of this last year. But in general, everyone still thinks I'm a liar and a cheat."

"Sounds like Hermione stuck by you when nobody else would."

"Yeah, she did," Harry repeated as they entered the casino floor. "She helped me prepare for the Tournament, spending countless

hours of her own time making sure I would be safe. I'm not really sure I'd be here today if it weren't for that."

"Let's go with that, Harry...the future I mean. You said you wouldn't be here today if it weren't for Hermione last year. So where do you see yourself in a few years, now that you've been granted this new lease on life?" Her tone was joking, especially at the end of her question, but Ellen's inquiry was grounded in actual curiosity.

"I haven't really thought about it," he said sheepishly. "Every year, I seem to have yet another run-in with death. It just seems likely that one of these days my luck will run out."

"Harry, can I be honest with you?" He nodded. "That's no way for someone your age to think. At your age you should be worrying about that girl you're crushing on, not on whether you'll survive to see the sun rise tomorrow."

She has no idea, Harry thought, as they finished their lap around the casino floor and began the return trip to The Signature.

"From what I've seen of you," Ellen continued, "you're a nice young man, and I can certainly see what Hermione sees in you. She has told us about a few of the things you're gone through, and hearing that your life with your relatives was not great only reinforces what Hermione's said. Honestly, I think you've had to grow up too quickly, and that's a real shame. I see Sirius up there trying to get you to loosen up by joking around with you, and I've seen it work. I've seen you smile, so you can't tell me it's as bad as you think. You don't have to live in fear of your life all of the time, even if there is a madman out there who's hell-bent on killing you. If I can offer you some advice Harry, it would be to let go. Do something for yourself, take a chance. You may find that your relationships will deepen if you let yourself go a bit."

"But I do let myself go...a lot actually!" Harry objected. "You've seen me around Hermione! I can joke around with her! I joke around with Sirius and Remus! Ron too!"

"You're exactly right, Harry," Ellen agreed. "But I'm not just talking about joking around. Loosening up is not just about joking around; there's more to it than that."

"Like what?" he asked, genuinely confused.

"That's entirely up to you. Simply joking around all of the time is a sign of a very shallow personality, and I know that doesn't describe you. Just based on our conversation today, I can tell that there's much more to you than that. You aren't shallow at all; you have incredible depth of character, and you need to show that. Be happy and show it. Don't be grim all of the time. Be social. If you want to be funny, don't rely on sarcasm all of the time. But more importantly, be affectionate. If I'm honest with you, you can come across as kinda cold sometimes, even if I know that you aren't. Show that. Show some affection. You have the perfect opportunity with this holiday...don't waste it."

Harry nodded silently as they returned to the lobby of their hotel. He didn't respond to Ellen verbally, instead considering her words as they waited for the elevator to arrive. The journey back to their floor was also taken in silence, with Ellen allowing Harry to ponder what she had said.

As they reached the doors to their respective rooms, Ellen turned to Harry. "Think about what I said, Harry. You have your whole life ahead of you, and it doesn't hurt to be prepared for the future." Harry nodded absently. "Thanks for talking with me too, Harry. That's exactly the kind of conversation I wanted to have. You even gave me a bit of insight into Hermione's life away from Richard and I, which is what I wanted, so thank you." With that, she turned and unlocked the door to her room before slipping inside.

Harry stood in the hallway alone for a moment, staring at the door to the Grangers' room. After a moment, he turned and entered his and Hermione's room, intent on seeing if she was ready to leave.

July 25, 2011

1:18 PM

Magical Gaming Commission

Las Vegas Office

Forty-three year old Roger Daltrey sighed deeply as he rubbed his eyes, looking away from the pile of reports that were scattered atop

his desk in various piles. So far, he had been in the office for nearly five hours that day, yet he still found himself sifting through the reports pertaining to the latest muggle obliviation incident at the Mandalay Bay resort. While normally this would be a relatively short and easy process, this particular incident meant it was anything but. In this case, a wizard had attempted to hijack and levitate a cash cart out the front door, in plain view of the hundreds of muggles on the casino floor. The level of obliviation required in this case had been greater than any so far that year within his jurisdiction, meaning he was treated to a pile of paperwork. Considering the fact that a four page form had to be completed for every obliviation subject, it was little wonder that Alverson was still reading through them all.

Putting the most recent piece of paper into the pile of those that he had completed, Roger turned around in his chair and leaned back as he stared out the window of his small office. While he held the position of Inspector, he was in no position of senior leadership, and his office reflected this position. Twisting his wedding band around his ring finger, he watched the pedestrians on the street four stories below, making their way around old-town Las Vegas.

Suddenly, he was startled out of his reverie by a knock at his office door.

"Come in," Daltrey sighed as he spun around in his chair once more to face the door from behind his desk.

The door opened and one of the office assistants, Ramona Mencia, stepped inside.

"What is it, Ramona?" Roger asked, perking up so as not to give away his true mood.

The silver-haired woman in her late fifties placed a single piece of paper atop the mountain on his desk. "One of our field agents just reported seeing Harry Potter in The Merlin earlier today," she said as Alverson picked up the paper. "I didn't know he was here."

Roger nodded without looking up from the page. "Yeah, we caught him coming in at McCarran Airport yesterday afternoon. I'm sure those stupid limeys in their Ministry would be itching to know he's here, but until he does something..."

"Anyway, just thought I'd pass that along. Did you want me to put anyone on it?"

Daltrey shook his head. "Nah, he hasn't done anything to warrant that kind of attention. But I'll keep an eye on it personally."

"Right," Ramona responded as she turned to leave the office.

"Thanks," Roger muttered as she closed the door behind her. He continued to read the short report, which did not go into too much detail aside from the fact that the agent had seen Potter, along with a group of others, go into The Merlin. But when the agent followed them inside, he lost track of them.

Pondering this, Daltrey reached over to grab his coffee mug and took a drink. He instantly spat it back into the cup in disgust. "Ugh, cold," he grumbled as he pushed the mug away. "Now why could the biggest celebrity in magical Britain be in Vegas?" he pondered. "Visiting a resort owned by another British wizard, no less...Harry Potter, what are you up to?"

Finished with reading the sparse report Ramona had given him, Roger placed it in the pile of completed paperwork. Making a snap decision to follow up on her report and temporarily abandon his remaining mountain of paperwork, he grabbed his keys from the desk and made his way out of the office.

Roger had been aware since an early age that he shared a name with the lead singer of the British rock band, The Who. His parents had always maintained that it was simply a coincidence, which Roger had never actually believed, due to the timing of his birth coinciding with the band's rise to fame. Despite this, in public, he maintained the ruse that his parents had devised, informing others that his name was simply coincidental. However, that did nothing to dissuade anyone who learned his name from asking whether he was related to the celebrity. In rare cases, he had even had people ask him for his autograph, thinking he was really the singer. All of this experience had led him to develop an admittedly baseless dislike for the British, due to the fact that the real Mr. Daltrey was British. This dislike did sometimes show during his limited interactions with the British, and had even contributed to a deep-seated suspicion of a certain Lucius Malfoy, owner and chairman of The Merlin resort.

Daltrey was sure, but had so far been unable to prove, any wrongdoing or shady activities on the part of the British wizard. Daltrey's superiors too, were of no help, never allowing an investigation or search of the property, despite his recent pleas. All of this had led Daltrey to his current bitter mood.

Exiting his office into a long room full of cubicles, Daltrey made his way toward the elevators on the far wall to his right. As he passed the reception desk, he was stopped once more by Ramona.

"Going somewhere?" she asked, spotting the keys in his hand.

"Just out," he replied cryptically.

She shook her head at his response. "You know, I'll never understand why you insist on driving that...contraption," she said, referencing the car keys in his hand. "Apparition is so much easier."

Daltrey gave her a small smile. "Ramona, you know I love you, but you'll never understand that sometimes, one has to just enjoy the finer things in life. Driving...that's one of them for me."

Ramona shrugged and shook her head once more, still not understanding.

Roger chuckled. "See ya Ramona," he said as he pushed the button on the elevator next to the reception desk. A moment later, the doors closed as he was whisked downstairs.

July 25, 2011

1:46 PM

"Hurry up, Sirius," Harry yelled. "We're almost there!"

Harry turned his attention back ahead of himself, after looking behind to see Sirius trudging along, almost begrudgingly. Despite his earlier declaration that nothing would keep him from the casino floor of the MGM Grand, Sirius found himself trailing behind the rest of the group as they made their return trip to The Merlin. Of course, it helped that Harry had told him that, if he behaved himself, he could gamble when they got done.

"I still don't think he's too happy to be here," Hermione observed.

"Tough luck for him," Harry replied unsympathetically. "Why should he get to skive off and play when the rest of us have work to do?"

Hermione shrugged. "Well, remember that this was supposed to be a holiday in the first place. So we can hardly blame him for wanting to do something entertaining."

"Come on, we've only been here for one day. I could understand that if this was the last day of the trip or something, but I mean, come on!"

Hermione shook her head as they crossed the final street near The Merlin, finding themselves in front of the impressive resort once more.

"Harry!" Remus called from a few meters in front of the teens. He had stopped moving as he waited for them to catch up.

"I guess that's my cue," Harry told Hermione, referring to the fact that Remus wanted to help Harry find Al. Hermione's parents, meanwhile, had wanted her to stay with them once again.

"Alright," she sighed as Harry split away and met up with Remus, "see you later."

Harry nodded as she walked away to meet her parents, just as Sirius passed by, grumbling about something unintelligible.

"I never thought that he would act like this," Harry said to Remus.

"Don't worry, Harry, I've seen it before. Whenever he gets his heart set on something and it gets taken away from him, he gets like this."

"But I would have thought he'd want to help us, what were his words? 'Stomp Lucius'?"

"And I'm sure he does. I think he's just putting on a show at this point. I really don't think he's as crushed as he looks; he just has an image to maintain. I do think he wanted to go down to the casino, but wasn't really against coming here. It's just not in his personality to give up easily."

"Huh," Harry grunted as he watched Sirius enter the building and he and Remus began to walk towards it as well.

"Anyway, Harry, we haven't really had a chance to talk since we got here."

"Oh no," Harry groaned quietly, anticipating the conversation to come. "I just had a conversation that started like this with Ellen. Do I have to do it again?"

"I just wanna ask," Remus began, ignoring his question, "how was your night last night?"

"Didn't see that question coming," Harry muttered, turning red with embarrassment.

"What?" Remus asked. "It's a simple question. How was your night?"

"Fine," Harry answered slowly. "I don't know what you're trying to get at with this question. It's almost Sirius-like." Remus grinned at that comment. "I mean, we slept in separate rooms for Merlin's sake! It's not like anything was gonna happen!"

Remus quirked an eyebrow at this comment as they entered the casino. "Were you expecting something to happen?" he asked.

"Gah!" Harry exclaimed. "You two are hopeless, you know that?"

"Relax, Harry," Remus instructed, chuckling. "This is a holiday after all. It's meant to be a relaxing time."

"But how can I relax when you and Sirius are on my back all the time about Hermione? Sirius especially; he just can't seem to let it go, what with the constant ribbing."

"I think he's just having a bit of fun at your expense, Harry," Remus suggested. "I really don't think he's out to embarrass you or anything like that. At least, that's not his entire goal. But can you really deny that his little barbs haven't made you think about and consider things that you wouldn't have normally done? I can tell by the way you seem to be tiptoeing around Hermione more now that some kind of

little bell has gone off in your mind. What does that mean though? That's not for me to decide. You've been given the perfect opportunity to figure things out, what with rooming with her and all. And I think that, no matter what you figure out, Sirius will support you in that. But at the same time, I don't think he can just abandon his childish, prankster nature, which explains a lot of how he's been acting about the entire situation."

Harry nodded absently as they entered the restroom to apply the same glamours as that morning. As soon as they finished, they approached the center of the circular casino, and the blackjack tables it contained. The first thing Harry did was lead the way to the table he remembered playing at that morning. However, as they approached, they found it empty, and instead found two of the other tables in that group staffed by different dealers. Both tables were being overseen by a woman who appeared to be the pit boss.

"He's not here," Harry announced.

"Well that's not really surprising," Remus replied. "Dealers rotate all the time. It's just another security measure to prevent cheating. That, along with the fact that casinos are open twenty-four hours a day, means that you can't always have the same dealer at every table."

"But it wasn't that long ago. Besides, he said he was just going on break. I don't think he'd be off by now."

Remus shrugged. "Well, worst case scenario is that we could ask the pit boss over there. If anyone would know, they would."

Harry agreed as they walked up to one of the empty blackjack tables and waited. A moment later, the pit boss, a woman in her mid to late-fifties with graying blonde hair, turned her attention away from the table she was observing and caught sight of them.

"Something I can help you with?" she asked.

Harry glanced at her maroon uniform, and the silver nametag pinned upon it. "Acutally...Donna," he began, "I was looking for someone. A certain dealer. I was hoping you'd know where he was."

"And who would that be?" she asked as she glanced over his shoulder, still observing the floor.

"His name was Al. He was actually my dealer this morning, and I was hoping to find him again this afternoon. He said something about taking a break when I left, but that was only a couple of hours ago. I hardly think he'd be done for the day so soon, but then again, I'm not sure when he started today."

Donna appeared as though she was thinking about Harry's question for a moment. Her brow furrowed in thought, she crossed her arms briefly before her visage cleared. "I don't know of any 'Al,' here," she replied finally. "And I know all of the dealers personally, since I never know who I'll be supervising from day to day. But I can tell you that we don't have a dealer named 'Al' here. At least, not at this property. I can't speak for the others, however."

"You've gotta be kidding me," Harry responded, flabbergasted. "He was just here this morning!"

Donna shrugged, not seeming to care about Harry's plight. "I can only tell you what I know," she said genuinely. "And that is that there is no 'Al' that works here, dealer or otherwise. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to be getting back to work." With that, she turned her back to the pair and focused her attention back on observing the two dealers before her.

"Well she was rude," Harry observed as they walked away.

"Maybe she could've handled that better," Remus agreed, "but her point still stands. As far as she's concerned, there is no 'Al' who is a dealer here. So that puts us back in square one."

"Actually," Harry retorted, "it puts us further back than square one. Now we have more problems than we had before. The fact that Al's missing just makes things more complicated and throws that note into question even more."

Meanwhile, Richard Granger found himself leaning against the casino wall next to a door labeled "Resort Staff Only," acting as though he was playing with his cell phone. Despite the fact that he appeared to be engaged in some form of business on his phone, Richard's attention was focused elsewhere, as he waited for a

member of the casino staff to approach the door. His wife and disguised daughter, meanwhile, were seated nearby on a pair of slot machines, counting all of the cameras they could see.

As he was glancing around the casino floor, Richard was approached by a member of the casino's security staff. As the burly man seemed to be approaching Richard directly, the latter stepped further away from the door and refocused his attention on the screen of his phone. However, instead of telling Richard off for standing too close to the door, the guard stopped in front of the door and reached for the card that dangled from a retractor on his belt.

Richard glanced up from his phone subtly to watch as the guard pulled the card out and slid it through the small black card reader situated next to the door. A name flashed up on the tiny screen on the reader, before the red light on the top turned green, accompanied by the faint clicking sound of a door unlocking. Pulling open the door, the guard entered and disappeared, the door closing quickly behind him.

Disappointed that he could not get a glimpse of the world behind the door, Richard returned to Ellen and Hermione, who both seemed to be idly playing their respective machines as they glanced at the ceiling.

"Find out anything?" Ellen asked discreetly as Richard sat down at the machine next to her. He fed a ten dollar bill into the machine and began to play.

"Just what Harry told us before, that the doors use a keycard. But I was able to see that, at the very least, each card is specifically coded to a specific employee. Their name shows up on a little screen on the card reader. That means that each employee has their own unique card, which could make things more difficult for us."

Ellen nodded her head in agreement. If each employee simply used a standard-issue card that was not unique to each employee, then it would be much easier to get hold of one or forge one, in order to get through the various doors in the resort. However, since each was keyed to a particular employee, that meant that each employee guarded their cards much more closely, and also meant that a real card must be used to get through doors. Using magic to unlock a

door was out of the question due to the magic detectors on the casino floor.

"So we have to find a way through the door without taking a card," Richard concluded. Ellen suddenly realized that he had been speaking while she had been considering their predicament. Seeing the look of realization upon his wife's face, Richard chuckled. "Get distracted, eh?" he asked humorously.

"Shut up," she retorted, gaining the attention of Hermione.

"What're you two on about?" she asked, turning away from her machine.

"Oh, your mother just seems to have the attention span of a five year old, that's all," her father explained.

"And your father is being an oversized child by pointing out other's shortcomings," Ellen added, grinning.

"What else is new?" Hermione joked as she pushed the button on the machine to play again. The first four bars all stopped quickly, each containing one of the bonus symbols heralded on the machine's sign. A brief moment later, after spinning a bit longer, the fifth bar stopped, also containing a bonus symbol. "Hey! I won!" Hermione exclaimed as the screen changed to another set of spinning symbols. According to the game, she was given five free spins to see how much she would win.

"Heh?" Richard grunted as he leaned over to see her screen. As the spins continued, Hermione was graced with an additional bonus, giving her an extra five spins within her other free spins. With bells ringing and lights flashing, Hermione was winning big...for a penny machine. Finally, when she had used her last free spin, the machine quieted down and the trio took stock of her winnings.

"Not bad," Ellen commented. "Especially considering how much you were playing. You did put in just one dollar, right?" Hermione nodded.

"Well, you just won almost seventy-five dollars, which is quite good," Richard praised. "I would just stop while you're ahead and take it while you can."

Hermione cocked her head in doubt of her father's proposal. "Yeah, but if I played a bit more, I could win a bit-

"Hermione," Richard warned, "don't even start with that. That's how someone becomes addicted. If I can offer you one word of wisdom? Quit while you're ahead. Trust me, it's for the better."

Glancing at her parents questioningly, curious as to her father's meaning, Hermione nodded. "Alright..." she said slowly, selecting the option on the machine to cash out her winnings.

"Ahem," Richard said, clearing his throat in order to change the subject, "so what did you find out you two?"

"I counted just over two hundred cameras on the casino floor," Ellen informed him. "At least, that's what I could see. There could be a few more."

'What's a few more when we're talking about hundreds of cameras?' he asked sarcastically. "So they have eyes everywhere. What else?"

"Eyes in the sky and ears on the floor," Hermione interjected.

"Huh?"

"They have cameras everywhere, but that's not all. We saw some bloke over there working on one of the tables, fiddling with some kind of box or device underneath it." She nodded over to a craps table about ten meters away. "It almost looked like he was installing it, or maybe replacing the unit. Anyway, it looked like there were wires running out of it to various points on the table. Almost like microphones."

"So they can see and hear everything on the casino floor? What about what we're saying now?"

Hermione shook her head. "I doubt it. Slot machines make too much noise...as we've already experienced, so microphones would be pretty much useless. They couldn't hear anything of value."

"Good point," Richard conceded as he saw Harry and Remus walking towards them, concern etched on their faces. "And here we

go," he muttered to the others, turning their attention toward the newcomers.

"Al doesn't exist, apparently," Harry announced as soon as the pair reached the Grangers. "Or so one of the pit bosses told us. I think she's full of it personally, since I saw him and talked to him myself, but that's what we know."

"At least it confirms that we shouldn't trust the note," Hermione suggested, trying to look on the bright side.

"But we're back where we started then," Harry objected.

"Not really," Ellen argued. "I mean, we can't be sure that the..." she looked around briefly, "object is what we think it is. But at least we have a starting point. Before, we had no idea what it could possibly be. Now, even though we aren't sure, we have somewhere to start."

Harry shook his head, discounting Ellen's argument. "Please tell me you guys were more productive than we were."

"Well, we learned a bit more about this place. But I'm not really too keen on talking about it here," Richard said. "Should we go back to our rooms?"

"Again?" Harry groaned. "What, are we gonna spend all day walking back and forth between our hotel and here? Just seems like a waste."

"Yeah," Ellen agreed somewhat, "but just think of all the sun you're getting. We don't get sun like this in Britain, so it's something new to experience. Just look on the bright side."

"I'm not sure if there's a pun in there about the sun and 'bright side,'" Harry mused, "but it wasn't funny either way."

Ellen snorted at Harry's thinly veiled insult. "It wasn't supposed to be a pun or funny at all, Harry. But thanks for pointing out how unfunny it really was."

"Not a problem," he replied with a grin as the Grangers rose from their seats at the slot machines. "So how'd you make out?"

"Well," Ellen began, "we were only playing on the penny machines, so we didn't spend too much money. So I'm only down about five dollars."

"But I'm up about seventy-five dollars, all told," Hermione announced proudly.

"That's great!" Harry congratulated her enthusiastically. "What're you gonna do with all that money?"

Hermione furrowed her brow in concentration for a moment as she seemed to mull over her options. "Well, I could invest it in a retirement account and see how big it is in a few decades," she joked. "Or I could go spend it all right now on some books or something fun while we're here. Both options are really tempting though."

"I can tell you right now that you can't be too young to invest in your retirement," Richard suggested. "If you invest that seventy-five dollars there right now, you could have about a thousand pounds in fifty years or so. Interest rates are just that good right now," he finished lightheartedly.

"Then I think I'll just spend it," Hermione decided.

"On?" Harry asked.

"I dunno yet. I'll think of something. This is only our first full day here, so we've got plenty left to go. Who knows? I might find something that I can't live without."

"Where'd McGon...erm, Minerva and Sirius go?" Harry asked the Grangers, having not seen where the pair had disappeared to after entering the casino.

"Well, I know Sirius was keen to hit the slot machines, remember?" Richard posed. "From what I could gather, Minerva was going in the same direction. However, I hardly think she was going to spend all her time gambling. I think it far more likely that she simply wanted to keep an eye on Sirius."

"Merlin knows he can find trouble anywhere," Remus muttered under his breath.

"I sense that there's a story there?" Richard asked as they left the bank of slot machines.

Remus glanced at Harry, who appeared to be listening intently. "Yeah, but not one for Harry's ears. Or Hermione's for that matter." A look of disappointment flashed across Harry's face at this. "Maybe another time, Richard. Let's just say it involves chicken, a garden spade, and some string. All in a muggle club, too. I'll leave it there, but you can use your imagination."

"...okay," Richard replied slowly. "I think I'll have to hear the whole story sometime..."

"It certainly makes for some interesting conversation around the table, I'll tell you that. But no matter, where the hell is Sirius?" Remus asked as he peered around the casino floor. Finally, he spotted him. "Oh, naturally," he groaned as the group walked toward the person in question.

Sirius was indeed sitting at a slot machine. However, he was not interested in the happenings on the screen. Instead, his attention was solely fixed on chatting up the busty blonde server standing in front of him, who's a top and shorts that were two sizes too small.

"Oh, honestly," Hermione complained as she rolled her eyes. "We've been here for less than an hour and he's already flirting with the locals. Merlin only knows how he'll be by the end of the trip."

"Padfoot!" Remus yelled, startling Sirius out of his intense, one-sided conversation with the server once they were a few meters away.

"Heh?" Sirius responded, his attention torn away from the person in front of him.

"Padfoot?" the blonde asked, turning to spot Remus. "What kind of name is that?"

"A nickname," Remus replied naturally. "Paddy O'Toole's his name, and, well, you see, he lost a foot in a tragic potato harvesting accident years ago, so we call him 'Padfoot.'"

The server looked down to see what appeared to be two perfectly operational feet.

"Fake foot," Sirius explained as he tracked her gaze. "The wonders of modern medical technology, I tell you."

"Erm...sure," she replied uncertainly. "Um...I'll be right back with your drink, sir," she finished, stepping away to indicate her desire to leave.

"Forget it," Remus interjected. "We were just leaving anyway, and I doubt he needs anything to drink." The look of relief on the server's face was priceless as she quickly turned and left the group. "Now, Sirius, where's your handler? I thought Minerva was staying with you?"

"And so she was," an aged female voice interrupted from behind him. Remus turned to find that Minerva had stealthily joined the group while his back was turned. "I simply wanted to see the 'talented' Mr. Black flounder under his own 'talent' with the ladies."

"A most noble goal, if I do say so myself, Minerva," Remus replied.

"Must you two mock me?" Sirius whined. "I was doing just fine on my own before you came over and ruined everything!"

"It didn't really look like you were doing fine," Harry said. "She looked like she was dying to get away. What were you talking to her about anyway?"

"Just how fascinating it must be to work in a place like this every day, seeing different kinds of people, not to mention the city itself. It must really be fun. And you know what? She actually seemed interested, no matter what you say, Harry."

"Sirius," Richard began, speaking up and joining the side of Harry, Remus, and Minerva, "I'm sure she deals with drunks all day who try to be suave and debonair and take her home with them. She's probably learned how to patronize them without becoming attached, so that's why you got the impression that she was interested when she really wasn't. Did you notice how she disappeared as soon as humanly possible when we got here? I rest my case."

"I think she might have been more interested in how he could be so 'suave' and 'debonair' without having a drink in him," Ellen muttered, earning an unladylike snort from Hermione. Ellen heard this, as Hermione was standing right next to her, even if they others didn't. She leaned over to her daughter and whispered in her ear. "Now, Hermione, what would Harry think if he heard that?"

"Mum!" Hermione exclaimed, gaining the attention of the others.

"What'd she do?" Harry asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Nothing!" Hermione replied quickly. "Hey, Sirius! We were gonna head back to the hotel," she added, trying to change the subject, "so come on!"

"Er...why?" Sirius asked.

"We have things to discuss," she said in response.

"Things?!" he asked.

"Things and stuff," Hermione added with mock seriousness.

"Oh...." Sirius replied, mocking the significance of her words. "Well then, but all means, lead the way."

"Gladly," she said as she took the lead confidently, the others trudging behind as she led the way out of the casino.

"Paddy O'Toole?!" Harry mocked as he leaned over to whisper to Remus.

Remus shrugged indifferently. "The thing about being a Marauder is that we all had to learn how to think on our feet. Came in handy more times than I can count with Minnie over there," he gestured toward McGonagall. "And got us out of trouble more times than I'd care to think about. We all learned how to think quickly. Except Peter, of course. He couldn't do anything quickly...except eat; everything else was too physical. You can probably tell just by looking at him."

"Too true," Harry muttered as they emerged into the bright sunlight of mid-afternoon Las Vegas.

"What're you two whispering about over there?" Sirius asked Harry and Remus loudly. "I feel like I should be watching my back or something here!"

"Nothing so sinister, Padfoot," Remus replied.

"Yeah , yeah, that's what you and James said that one time too, and I believed you then. But look where it got me! You put a sticking charm on my kegs! You had me waddling around the castle all day until Filius could get it undone!"

"But it was pretty damn funny, don't you think?"

"No! It wasn't funny at all! It was embarrassing!"

"But it would have been funny if you had thought of it, right?" Remus prodded.

"Uh uh," Sirius said as he shook his head. "I'm not falling for that ploy. It wasn't funny. That's my story and I'm sticking with it."

"Whatever you say, Paddy."

"Whatever you say, Paddy," Sirius mocked. "Why are we leaving again, anyway? I was having a perfectly fine time on my own in there without you lot coming and ruining it. What's so important? Did Moldywart pay you a visit while I wasn't looking or something? Was he wearing a tutu and playing a trombone while his Death Eaters formed a chorus line behind him? Because the way you're acting, anything else would be a letdown."

"Sirius?" Harry interrupted politely.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Shut up. You're acting like a child, and that's saying something coming from me. I don't know what it is about this city, but it's changed you or something. And I don't like it, so knock it off."

Sirius jerked his head back in surprise as he walked, taken aback by Harry's forceful words. He had no idea that he had been acting so immature. Instead, he had been trying to be funny, acting as though

everything was a chore for him, and that he was not interested in helping the group. But apparently his behavior had not been taken as he had intended, and instead had made him out to be immature and spoiled.

"I'm...erm....sorry, Harry," Sirius admitted sheepishly. "I wasn't trying to be childish, I was trying to be funny. Apparently it fell flat."

"Yeah, it did," Harry agreed. "But a word of advice if I may, Sirius?" Sirius nodded. "Next time you try to pull something like that, make it more gradual." Harry grinned evilly. "The change in your personality was far too abrupt to be believable. Spread it out over a few days or something next time and it'll be more believable."

"I'll keep that in mind, kiddo."

"Are there any other pearls of wisdom that Professor Potter would like to impart to us?" Remus asked, having overheard the entire conversation.

"I'll have to consult my lesson plan in my room," Harry joked. "You'll have to wait until next class to see."

"I look forward to it."

Roger Daltrey spun back around in his seat and pressed the button on the screen of the slot machine to cash out his winnings. Grabbing the ticket from the dispenser, he rose and stuffed it in his pocket as he made his way toward the door.

Having driven recklessly from the office, he had arrived at The Merlin in time to see Potter enter the resort with another man, and make his way to the restroom. A moment later, Potter's companion had emerged, accompanied by a completely different individual. Daltrey could only assume that it was Potter, who had been disguised. He had then watched as Potter and his companion had walked the casino floor, stopping only to speak to a pit boss at the blackjack tables. They had then met up with a few other individuals, who Daltrey did not recognize. After exchanging a few words, the group departed the casino. So far, Daltrey had not seen anything incriminating occur, which he found somewhat disappointing.

Still, Daltrey was not convinced. It was simply too coincidental that Potter, who had been famously barred by the British Ministry of Magic from travelling abroad, suddenly found himself in Las Vegas, and was frequenting an establishment owned by another famous British wizard. A wizard, Daltrey reminded himself, whose shady dealings continued to raise suspicions.

"Can I get you something to drink, sir?" a pleasant voice asked, startling Roger out of his thoughts. He looked up to find a scantily clad server with her pad and pen at the ready.

"No, thank you," he replied gruffly. "I was just leaving." He pushed past her and walked swiftly out the door, pulling his cell phone out of his jeans pocket as he did so. Having worked in the field for years, he had learned to keep a set of casual clothes in his car, in case he needed to change quickly in order to blend into his surroundings. This situation was no different.

Finding himself on the Strip, he glanced down the street in either direction, hoping to find Potter and his associates. Finally, he caught sight of them, a good distance away, crossing the street to the MGM Grand.

Daltrey punched a few numbers into his phone and put it up to his ear. Despite the advantages of magic, there were still times where muggle technology was superior. Cell phones, providing instant communication, were an example of this. The fact that the U.S. government had developed the ability to shield muggle technology from magical interference helped as well. They had found that certain magical methods of communication, such as patroni, were far too conspicuous and exclusive to be practical.

His call was picked up just as the group Daltrey was observing entered the MGM. "Hello?" the familiar feminine voice on the other end asked.

"Ramona," Roger greeted curtly, "find someone to watch the MGM Grand. I think Potter's staying there, and I'm not sure what he's up to. I just wanna cover my bases."

"Why do you think he's up to anything?" she asked, questioning his judgment. Over several years of working with each other, Ramona and Roger had developed a working relationship that allowed her to

ask such pointed questions without it being considered insubordination. They had also developed the ability to banter good-naturedly, without consequence.

"Just call it a hunch."

"A hunch that conveniently involves, in some way or another, a large number of Brits? That doesn't sound like a hunch, that sounds like discrimination."

"Ramona," Roger groaned, "can you just do this for me?"

"Mr. Alverson isn't going to like this," she said, referring to the head of their office, Bruce Alverson.

"Yeah, but he's on vacation for two more weeks, remember?" Daltrey reminded her. "Do this and I'll see if I can get Amy to give up her mother's cookie recipe you want so much."

There was silence on the other end of the line as Ramona considered his proposal. Ever since he had brought in a plate of cookies that his wife had made, Ramona had been clamoring for the recipe. "Fine," she answered finally. "I'll see who I can get."

"Thanks Ramona, you're the best," Roger complimented with sickening sweetness.

"Don't let that wife of yours hear that," she joked.

"Never," he replied with a chuckle. "I'm gonna stay out here for the rest of the day to keep an eye out. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Sure thing. Oh! Kyle's got some forms for me, so I gotta go. See you tomorrow!" she hung up with a click, leaving Daltrey to glance at his phone and shake his head briefly as he pocketed his phone once more.

July 25, 2011

2:57 PM

The Signature at MGM Grand

Minerva McGonagall inserted her key card into the lock on the door of her suite and waited for the click before turning the handle and entering. The others followed behind, with Sirius bringing up the rear, closing the door behind himself.

"In all seriousness," he began, "what's so important that we had to walk all the way back here to discuss?"

"Nothing," Harry replied smartly. "That's exactly the problem."

"Then why the hell are we here instead of finding something out back there?" Sirius exclaimed, not with anger toward Harry, but in confusion.

"Now I know what I'm getting Sirius here for Christmas," Richard muttered. "A bloody 'Jump to Conclusions' mat. Just hear the boy out, will you?"

Harry shot Richard a grateful smile and nod before pressing on. "Moony and I went to look for Al, but in the end, we found out that he supposedly doesn't exist. That's really odd, considering the fact that I saw him and talked to him."

As Harry was speaking, Minerva walked over to the small table near the sofa and picked something up.

"So the note can't be real then, can it?" Sirius asked.

"I wouldn't say that, Mr. Black," Minerva said as she looked at the note in her hand. "Looks like Severus paid us a visit while we were away," she added, nodding toward the piece of unlined muggle paper in her hand.

"And?" Remus asked expectantly.

"I think it'd be best if I read it aloud," she concluded, pushing her glasses up her nose. "'As you were not present when I returned, I was forced to leave this note to report my findings. After some...liquid encouragement, Lucius was far more...willing to provide me with additional information. The Dark Lord has hidden 'the key to his immortality,' in order to keep it from Potter's potentially prying mind. However, the Dark Lord will be arriving in six days to key himself into a small inner vault within the main casino vault

where the item is stored. Lucius would not reveal how the Dark Lord would key himself in, however. Now, I must remove this conversation from Lucius's memory. I will be in touch. SS."

"Well that's certainly...interesting," Hermione commented once Minerva had finished reading.

"Who'da thunk Al'd be right?" Harry asked.

"Thunk,' Harry?" Hermione balked. "What kind of word is that?"

Harry shrugged. "Sometimes I make up words to suit my needs. You should have noticed that by now."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Oh yeah. How could I forget the word 'thinkify?' Or 'playificate?' I don't know where you get it, but that's just ridiculous!"

"New words are always considered a bit barmy. And I'm just trying to have a bit of fun," Harry rationalized. "But we're getting off track. So, at least as far as Snape's concerned, the thing is a horcrux. So what do we do about it? More to the point, why didn't Snape use this 'liquid encouragement' earlier? Would've saved us a lot of trouble."

"You mean get him drunk and wipe his memory?" Richard asked sarcastically. "Gee, I wonder? Maybe the inherent immorality of it all?"

"That's never stopped Snape before," Harry countered.

"That's true," Sirius replied. "Snivellus is the least moral person I know...outside of Lucius here of course. He just happens to be on our side. Or so I'm told."

"Anyway, back on topic," Remus interrupted, "we've gotta do something about this thing. Now that we know this is a horcrux, we can't just let it stay here."

"I thought you said that we weren't equipped to steal anything?" Harry pointed out.

"We aren't," Remus agreed. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't do it anyway."

"That doesn't make sense," Hermione said, confused.

"We aren't equipped for this," Remus repeated, "but we should still try. We could fail, but we kinda know what we're up against, what with observing the casino floor a bit. With a bit more observation, preparation, and planning, we could pull it off."

"I see where you're coming from," Harry said with a nod. "The only problem is that we don't know what's behind the doors on the casino floor. For all we know there could be mountain trolls back there." He shared a glance with Hermione. "We need to find that out."

"But we've only got six days," Richard pointed out. "That doesn't give us much time before this thing is sealed away for good. At least, I assume it would be for good. I'm not too knowledgeable about this whole magic thing, but that's what I got out of the note."

"As did I," Remus agreed. "And you make a good point. Time is of the essence here. Fortunately, there are several of us. I almost think we should go back again tonight to see if we can get through one of those doors. See if we can find out what's in the back, maybe see if we can find the security office. I'm willing to wager we'll have to get in there somehow and disable the security systems at some point. But I almost think I'm getting ahead of myself."

"At this point, we should just have an idea of what the layout of the place is," Sirius said, agreeing with his friend. "The only problem is that I think it would look a bit conspicuous if all of us waltzed into the back of the house and started to wander around. I don't think more than one person would be able to pull it off, personally."

"So then how do we want to do this?" Harry asked. "I'm assuming that there are cameras in the back as well as on the casino floor, so we have to deal with those. I did bring my cloak, if that's any consolation."

"James's cloak?" Sirius asked. "Oh, the times we used to have with that thing..."

"But wouldn't it look a bit weird if the cameras saw a door opening only to have nothing come through?" Hermione asked.

"True," Harry mused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "And there's also the issue of getting the door open in the first place."

"Yeah, they're opened by personalized keycards," Richard reminded everyone. "So I'm assuming that if we took one, they'd just cancel it instantly and try and track it."

"What about the Imperious curse?" Sirius suggested. "I mean, we could use it on one of the guards and get them to open the door for us. It'd save a lot of work."

"And would land us in prison too," Hermione reminded him. "That curse is illegal here in America too. We couldn't get away with using it. Not to mention the fact that there are magic detectors on the floor, so as soon as we cast it, we'd be discovered. No, we have to come up with something else."

Silence permeated the room for several moments as its occupants considered their options, all weighing various ideas internally.

"I've got an idea," Harry announced finally, but stopped short of explaining it.

"And?" Sirius asked impatiently.

"Well, it depends on how involved you want to be Mr. Granger...I mean, Richard," Harry amended.

"What do you mean?" the elder Granger asked. "I thought I was already involved?"

"Well, I kinda thought that you thought that this was your holiday," Harry explained. "After all, it was supposed to be one in the first place. I really didn't think that you wanted to spend your entire time running around trying to rob a casino. At least, that wouldn't be my first idea for a holiday. But then again, what do I know?"

"I could do it," Richard volunteered from his seat on the sofa. "At least, I assume that's what you're asking."

"Huh?" Sirius asked. "Are you sure?"

"I'm liable to agree with Sirius here," Remus agreed. "You have no stake in this, so why should you put yourself on the line for us? This was supposed to be a holiday for you."

"Yet here we are," Richard argued. "I mean, Ellen and I have come all this way, so we might as well do something, right?" He looked to his wife for confirmation, and received a nod from her. "Besides, we are involved. Hermione here is involved, which means we are too..." he trailed off.

"And?" Sirius asked expectantly.

"And we know what these Death Eaters do, or want to do, to muggles like us. So if we can do anything to stop them, then we'll do it. It's an opportunity to make a difference, to do something worthwhile. Even if it is technically illegal."

"And what do you think about this, Ellen?" Remus asked.

She shrugged in response. "Don't look at me, this is his decision. He can do with himself what he likes. As for the whole holiday issue, I do happen to agree with him. Personally, I think it's kinda like a holiday for us to even get involved in the magical world at all, so it's not really an issue. Besides, I think it'd be kinda fun. Almost like a spy thriller or something. So count me in. But why do you ask, Harry?"

"Well, what if Richard here was a new employee?" Harry posed to the others. "And what if he forgot his card?"

There were a few looks of understanding and realization around the room as he proposed his plan.

"But there are a few things that need to happen in order for it work right," he added.

"So what do you want me to do, Harry?" Richard asked.

"Well, I was thinking..."

End of Chapter 9

A/N: I just want to thank all of you for the overwhelmingly positive response I've received, both for chapter 8, as well as for the story in general. The number of reviews I received after posting chapter 8 was larger than any other single chapter post I've ever made, so thank you for that. Of course, there were a few negative reviews in there, all from the same person who reviewed three prior chapters. However, in no way do I expect this story to appeal to everyone, and since everyone is entitled to their own likes and dislikes, they are free to review this story however they like.

I also want to mention those who correctly guessed the title of this chapter: Kyprioth's crow, Kingswriter, acam, Fallen-Petals15, AnnaDruvez, luvsanime02, and MariusDarkwolf. That's more than have ever correctly guessed a single chapter so far, so well done!

There are a few things to talk about though (I always seem to find something to talk about here), mainly revolving around some things mentioned in a few reviews. One reviewer mentioned that the level of gambling in chapter 7 was a bit much and got somewhat boring. In response, I will say this: while the story does take place in Las Vegas, gambling will not play a major role. There will be times throughout the story where gambling will play a part in the plot, but they will be few. Granted, there are times, such as in this chapter, and in the next, when the characters find themselves on slot machines or playing some kind of game. However, in the vast majority of those instances, the gambling will take a back seat to the dialogue or whatever else is going on. In those situations, the casino and gambling simply set the backdrop for the scene.

A couple of reviewers mentioned the possibility that the dealer 'AI' could be someone else. I am not going to touch that possibility at all. AI will re-appear in this story, so have no fear. However, his full back story will not appear for a while. The only thing to bear in mind is that the reason AI recognized Harry was that he checked his fake passport. There was not necessarily anything else going on there.

Chapter Title Hint: As we can see from the end of this chapter, the characters are going to rush head-first into formulating their plan, since they've got a new goal. While that previous sentence contains a few hints, let me give you some information about the song. It was written by guitarist Brian May for his solo album "Back to the Light." However, this song was changed to a Queen song when he heard

Freddie sing it. The video for this song is the last color music video featuring Freddie Mercury.

Since I'm not really too concerned with giving this chapter title away, I will mention one other thing I realized recently. I was listening to my CD version of "Greatest Hits II" in my car the other day, and I realized that chapters 9 and 10 of this story correspond to tracks 9 and 10 of that compilation. So, if you can't figure out the title of the song from the hint I gave above, this will give you the correct answer.

Anyway, thank you all for the positive response you've given this story so far, and I hope you continue to enjoy it. Please let me know if you do by leaving me a review. Since I can't think of much else to talk about here, I'll see you soon with chapter 10.

Chapter 10

Headlong

"So what do you want me to do, Harry?" Richard asked.

"Well, I was thinking you could pose as the new employee. You would have lost your keycard, so you'll need to get someone else to open the door for you."

"Sounds a bit simple, Harry," Hermione observed.

"That's because it is. Of course, we'll need some kind of distraction so that the real employee doesn't get much time to think about it. That's where a couple others come in. Minerva, you'll need to be in on the distraction."

"Right," she agreed. "Who'll be with me?" She looked around the room to see who would be joining her. Finally, one raised their hand.

"I'll do it."

July 25, 2011

6:19 PM

The Merlin, Casino

Richard Granger emerged from the restroom near the front entrance to the casino of The Merlin, his appearance completely altered. His previously thick brown hair had been exchanged for thinning silver hair, and he now sported a thin mustache to match his new locks. Whereas he had previously been of average build, standing at about 1.8 meters, or five feet, nine inches, he had gained another three inches in height, but had gained some weight as well. He now appeared to be a six-foot tall, heavyset man in his mid-fifties. As per the discussion in Minerva's room, Richard had had his voice changed as well, eliminating his British accent and replacing it with an American one instead. This had been accomplished through the use of a modified translation charm, placed on his vocal cords by Remus.

His clothing had been modified as well. In order to save time, Minerva had transfigured his normal clothing into the traditional garb of a security officer at The Merlin. While he had previously been dressed in a plain dark red t-shirt and faded jeans, he was now clad in a dark blue tunic inlaid with gold trim, accompanied by black slacks. The nametag affixed to his tunic indicated that his new name was 'Stan.'

As he emerged from the restroom carrying a bag containing Harry's invisibility cloak, he caught sight of Harry, Hermione, and Ellen, sitting at one bank of slot machines near the restroom. Across the casino, he could see Sirius at another machine with Minerva, while Remus milled around after having exited the restroom a moment before Richard after changing his appearance.

After waiting around for a moment while observing the casino floor, Richard finally spotted an actual member of the resort's security staff heading toward a door labeled "Resort Staff Only," near the cashier cage. Richard immediately took off, walking quickly in order to intercept the man before he went through the door.

Just as the real employee reached for the door handle, Richard arrived. He noticed that the employee appeared to be in his early twenties and of average build, wearing a nametag that identified him as 'Chris.'

"Hey...um...Chris," Richard began frantically, making an obvious show of looking at the nametag. "I'm really up shit creek here. See, this is my first day and...shit! I lost my card somewhere and I can't find it at all. I just need to get through the door here and see if I dropped it-"

"Excuse me!" a female voice shrieked from behind him.

Both Richard and Chris turned to find Minerva rushing toward them. The panicked look on her face belied her mood, and Richard could sense a cringe from Chris, who was standing next to him.

"Excuse me!" Minerva repeated just as she reached the pair. She grabbed Chris by the sleeve tightly as she spoke frantically. "That man over there...I just left for a moment...he took my machine!" she explained shakily to the wide-eyed young guard.

Chris threw up his hands defensively, a difficult task due to Minerva's grip on his sleeve. "Now, just calm down ma'am and-

"I will not calm down! He is over there playing with my money! Money that I worked long and hard to earn! I travelled all the way over here to play, and I don't have much money mind you because of my pension, only to have some deranged lunatic take my machine and money!"

Richard could see Chris roll his eyes before he looked past Minerva toward the machine at which she was pointing. Sure enough, there was someone sitting there. Despite his scraggly appearance and shoulder-length hair, Richard knew that it was Sirius who was playing the machine.

"I was um, just going on break," Chris stammered in his defense, looking to Richard for help. "Can't you just handle this?"

"Handle this?" Minerva asked. "Is that how you talk about your guests? I'm not some problem that can just be handed off to the next unsuspecting sap!"

"Look man," Richard began, trying his best to keep English terminology out of the conversation, "I just need to get in there. If I stay and help this guest, then I won't be able to get in, will I? Besides, I think you'd know how to handle it better, since you've been here longer than I have...right?" He added a note of uncertainty to the end of his argument in order to imply that his knowledge of the resort staff was not yet fully developed.

"Will you just come take care of the situation?" Minerva demanded. "Look, all I want you to do is just scare him off or get my money back or something. And no offense to you," she looked at Richard, "but you just wouldn't fit the bill."

"Nah, I shouldn't take offense at that, should I?" Richard muttered. "Look," he continued in an audible tone, "it shouldn't take that long to take care of the situation, right? So why don't you just let me in then go help this nice lady. That way you can solve both problems at the same time. Then you can have your break without having to worry about anything."

Chris's eyes shifted between the two for a moment before he made up his mind. "Fine," he groaned as he threw up his hands in defeat. He pulled his keycard from his belt and slid it through the reader. Instantly, the light on the reader turned green and his name was displayed, both of which were accompanied by an audible click as the door unlocked.

"Thanks man," Richard offered with complete honesty as he reached for the handle and pulled the door open. He did not look back at Chris or Minerva as he walked through the door, allowing it to close behind him.

As soon as Richard had disappeared, Minerva refocused her attention on her ploy. "Now help me with this moron!" she demanded, dragging Chris toward the machine where Sirius was playing.

"Um...sir...?" Chris began tentatively as the pair reached Sirius. Sirius, for his part, spun on his stool and looked at the two newcomers expectantly as he pressed the button on his machine to play once more.

"Ugh!" Minerva exclaimed at Chris's nervous tone. "You obviously don't know how to handle the situation! And while you're standing here pussyfooting about, he's spending more of my money!"

"Your money?" Sirius asked in bewilderment. "What in the bloody hell are you on about, woman?"

"You know full well what I'm on about," she screeched in an attempt at hiding her British accent. "I stood up for just one moment to stretch and move around and you come prancing in here and taking my seat! And now you're playing with my credits! That's what I'm on about!"

Chris glanced between the two briefly. "Sir, did you take her seat?" he asked diplomatically.

"I most certainly did not," Sirius maintained fervently. "All I did was sit down here and began to play. I put in my own money and everything, so I have no idea her problem is."

"My 'problem?' My 'problem' is that you are playing with my money on that machine!" Minerva argued. "My money was on there originally. All you did was add some of your own!"

Chris made a downward gesture with his hands in an attempt to calm Minerva down. "Ma'am, let's just calm down here, we don't want to make a scene."

"I'll make a scene as much as I damn well please!" she shrieked. "I was just sitting here," she sat down on the stool next to Sirius, roughly in the middle of the row of six machines, "playing for a while, when I just wanted to stand up for a moment and move around. I was only gone for a minute when I found him," she pointed derisively at Sirius, "sitting on the machine playing as if his life depended on it. He took my machine!"

"Well who leaves their money on a machine and leaves anyway?" Sirius asked, pointing out the obvious.

"Someone who was coming right back!" Minerva argued.

"Well it doesn't matter anyway," Sirius continued. "I tell you woman, there wasn't anything on this machine when I got here!"

"Are you absolutely certain it was this machine?" Chris asked Minerva, balancing the arguments of both guests.

"Absolutely!" she exclaimed, staying seated on the machine next to Sirius. "See? Lemme show you!" She touched the screen to bring the machine to life. As soon as the screen changed to the normal game screen, she paused. There, on the bottom-right corner of the screen, was a box that stated that the credits available on that machine totaled more than one thousand.

"What did I tell you?" Sirius asked triumphantly as Minerva pretended to examine the screen closer. "With old age comes senility, that's what I've always said."

Chris's head jerked back in astonishment at that last comment, taken aback that Sirius would be so brazen. "Sir, maybe it would be best if you two played in different areas of the casino?" he suggested.

"I'm staying right where I am, thank you very much," Sirius said boldly. "She was the one who made the mistake, not me. So I'm not gonna move."

"I'll leave," Minerva acquiesced sheepishly as she pushed the button to cash out her machine. An instant later, after the voucher had printed she rose and left Sirius and Chris, offering nary an apology to either.

"Bitch," Sirius muttered.

Chris did not respond verbally, but instead offered Sirius a shrug before turning and heading back to the door that Richard had caught him at. A moment later, he stepped through, and the door closed behind him.

As soon as the door closed, Minerva approached Sirius from the opposite direction of that which she had left in, and sat down on the other side of him. "Were you able to sufficiently air your grievances against me, Mr. Black?" she whispered.

Sirius shook his head and chuckled. "You know me, Minnie, always willing to help out where needed."

"And it just so happened that this was just a glorified prank?" she asked.

"Details, details. But do you think we gave Richard enough time to get out of that bloke's way?" They did not expect that Richard would be able to fully survey the back of the house in the few minutes that they would be distracting the guard. However, the goal had been to buy him enough time to hide or get out of sight, once the guard actually went through the door. It wouldn't do to be caught wandering about by the same person who had let him through the door in the first place.

"I haven't a clue," Minerva responded. "But I'd wager that we'll find out soon enough, won't we?"

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6:21 PM

Richard Granger, disguised as a new member of the security staff at The Merlin named 'Stan,' closed the door to the casino floor softly before turning and taking stock of his new surroundings. Just inside the door, he found a wide, stark white hallway that sloped gently downward. Charcoal gray handrails lined the sides of the four meter wide passage, while the bright fluorescent overhead lights reflected brilliantly off of the matching charcoal laminate floor. A single security camera hung from the ceiling, pointed directly at the door.

Peering down the hall, Richard could see that it was approximately fifty meters long, and bore walls that were completely naked aside from the rails. At the end, he could see a T-shaped intersection, with a single door in the middle of the visible wall.

Making his way down the hallway, Richard could consciously feel the downward slope, which brought to mind the possibility that he was travelling underground, albeit at a gradual pace. However, he kept up a consistently fast pace as he walked, glancing over his shoulder occasionally to make sure he was not being followed.

As he reached the junction, Richard found that there was a label next to the single door, indicating that the room was the actually "Break Room 2." Using this room as a landmark, Richard looked to either side down both of the branching paths to find that both were halls that were curved, seemingly to match the shape of the casino above. Each hall curved in the opposite direction of the other, yet both were full of various doors. Choosing to head to his left first, Richard did just that, passing yet another security camera positioned in front of the break room door.

As he walked, Richard found that, while many of the doors were protected with card readers similar to the ones on the casino floor, many were not, and were instead outfitted with normal locking doorknobs. This didn't confound Richard at all, as he assumed that there were some doors that did not house highly-sensitive materials. Many of the doors were labeled with names, which forced Richard to conclude that these rooms were actually offices of some sort.

However, aside from a normal door to the "Ventilation Control Room," this hall contained nothing of interest, as it ended with a door leading to the employee parking garage. Directly adjacent to that door was a labeled elevator, indicating that it led to the hotel itself.

Realizing that there was nothing of value down this hall, Richard entered the break room at the intersection between the two halls. He had been sent to find out what lay behind the scenes at The Merlin, so he figured that he might as well see everything there was to see.

As soon as he entered the break room, Richard stopped to look around. Like the hallways outside, this room was painted in a stark white, with three of the four wall of the rectangular room lined with drab gray lockers. In the center of the room, Richard could see six small round tables, each with three or four chairs surrounding them, while the far right side of the room was taken up with a pair of sofas that faced a moderate-size television which hung on the wall. Roughly a dozen various employees were scattered around the room, most of them clustered around the tables as they ate.

Not wanting to linger at the door for too long, Richard began to wander around the room, making an obvious show of searching for a lost item, especially near the lockers.

"What'cha lookin for?" a burly man asked from one of the nearby tables.

Richard looked up quickly and made eye contact. "I, um...lost my keycard somewhere," he replied, embarrassed. "I'm not sure where I dropped it, so I thought I might as well look in here."

"Well what's your name?" the man asked. "I haven't seen you around before, but if I see your card I'll give you a holler."

"Stan...Rickon," Richard replied as he sat down across from the man, who was dressed similarly to Richard. "It's my first day here, and I've already gone and screwed myself by losing my card."

"Hey now, don't go gettin' all bummed out about it," Richard's companion reassured him. Looking at his nametag, Richard found that his name was Morgan, which Richard found moderately amusing, considering the sheer size of the man.

"But it's my first day!" Richard protested as he glanced around the room. "It doesn't look good for me if I lose my keycard on my first day."

Morgan shrugged. "That could be. But you could always talk to Bomley and get another one. Happens all the time."

"Bomley?" Richard asked quietly, his interest suddenly piqued. That was a name he had not heard before.

"Yeah, you know, the guy who should have hired you." Seeing the blank look on Richard's face, Morgan scowled. "Don't tell me he pawned that off too." Richard shrugged. "Gah! The man's just about worthless. He's the head of security for this place but he doesn't do anything. It's almost like he's sitting on his hands waiting for something to happen."

"What do you mean?"

"He's just about as useless as anyone could possibly be. We've been understaffed as far as security goes ever since we opened a few years ago. I'm not sure what that Malfoy guy sees in him, but his security measures are a joke. From what I can see, all he uses are cameras and a few microphones for security, nothing else." From this, Richard was able to conclude that Morgan was definitely not privy to the magical side of security for the resort. "And his attitude...don't even get me started on that. The man clearly wasn't made for security; he's just so lackadaisical about it. He almost seems more worried about rubbing elbows with the bigwigs than with making sure us little people have the resources we need to do our job. But then again, he did get someone new hired," he added, nodding toward Richard, "so I guess maybe it's not as bad as it seems."

"Well, we'll see," Richard replied vaguely. "Anyway," he continued, picking up his bag and rising from his seat, "I'd better keep looking for my card, just in case I find it. I don't want to have to get a new card on my first day. It'd just look bad, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I feel ya man. Anyway, I'll see you around, alright?"

"Erm...yeah," Richard responded, as he turned and walked back to the door.

Exiting the break room, Richard found himself back at the junction between the two halls, and made his way down the other hallway. However, almost as soon as he passed the break room, he saw that

there were indeed more keycard readers in front of the doors in this hallway, leading him to conclude that there were more sensitive targets on this side. Despite this fact, however, this hallway was much shorter than the other, stretching for approximately twenty meters before ending.

As he traversed this passage, Richard quickly spotted a door, accessible only by keycard, with a prominent label that read, "Security Office. Level 5 Clearance Required."

Despite being intrigued by this door, as it promised at least a modicum of control over the resort's security systems, Richard was unable to access it, as he lacked a keycard. However, based on the fact that a particular clearance level was required to access the room, further credibility was added to the argument that they would not be able to simply steal a card and have free reign over the resort. They needed some other way to get around. But that was a matter to be discussed at a later time. Instead, his current task was simply to find out as much as he could about the layout of this part of the casino.

Interested more in what lay at the end of this hall, Richard pressed on, passing doors that led to the Cashier Cages, and others that led to various maintenance rooms. Based on the various rooms he could see, Richard concluded that this side of the hall was predominantly occupied by operations-related rooms, rather than executive and managerial rooms.

However, his train of thought was interrupted as he reached the end of the short hall, where another elevator door was positioned. As opposed to the previous elevator at the far end of the passage, this was completely unmarked. In fact, the only thing, aside from the double doors, that indicated that it was an elevator was the small button next to it adorned with a down arrow. Nothing else about the door or its surroundings indicated its destination.

Just as he went to examine the door closer, Richard heard a door close behind him. He whirled around to find a pit boss, dressed in the traditional maroon tunic, looking at him curiously.

"Were you looking for something?" the balding, middle-aged man asked as he took in Richard's posture.

Richard immediately straightened up and smoothed out his blue tunic. "I...erm...just lost my keycard," he explained, trying to sound embarrassed when he was actually nervous. "I was just looking around for it, and thought I might've dropped it over here."

"By the vault elevator?" the newcomer asked suspiciously.

Richard shrugged. "Well, see, this is my first day, so I was looking around the place earlier, trying to find out where everything was, and I think I might've dropped it."

"Right..." the pit boss trailed off. "Did you need some help finding it?"

Richard shook his head fervently. "Nah, that's alright," he said. "I might have dropped it on the casino floor, to tell you the truth. I might as well look out there just to make sure."

"Do you know your way out?"

"I think I can find my way on my own," Richard said, trying to get the pit boss to leave so that he could continue on his mission.

"I don't want you to get any more lost," the other man began, "so I'll just show you out."

"You don't have to do that. I mean, I don't want you to have to go out of your way for me or anything."

The pit boss's eyes narrowed slightly in heightened suspicion. "It's no problem," he said. "I was just heading out onto the floor myself, so I'd be more than happy to walk you out there." His tone of voice left little doubt as to his intentions: he was going to walk Richard to the casino floor.

"Well, if you don't mind," Richard conceded with a small, inaudible sigh. He then followed the man back to the junction, where they turned left and headed back up the ramp to the door at the end. A moment later, they reached the door, and the pit boss slid his card through the card reader before pulling the door open for Richard. Resignedly, Richard stepped through, followed closely by his companion.

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6:22 PM

Having watched the altercation between Richard, Minerva, Sirius, and the unsuspecting security officer, Harry, Hermione, and Ellen turned back to their respective slot machines and waited. They had already turned down two visits from the various servers on the casino floor, instead intent on looking as though they were simply a group of friends who were gambling. The fact that the Grangers and Sirius had barred Harry and Hermione from drinking any alcohol during the trip may have played a part as well, even if their current disguises meant they could pass for someone over the legal age.

"So how do you think he's doing?" Harry asked with a sidelong glance toward the door that Richard had disappeared through.

"Honestly, Harry," Ellen began, "Richard's never been the best liar. Granted, I've been married to him long enough to see though any lies he tries to pass off, but I still don't think he was necessarily the best for the job."

"I thought it would be best to have a muggle do it," Harry reminded her, bringing up part of the discussion from earlier in the day. "I'm sure that a lot of the stuff back there is muggle, so I thought that someone who at least had something of an understanding of it all would be best."

"We'll see then, won't we?" she asked. "I just hope you people are good at breaking people out of prison, if it comes to that, that is."

"Oh, honestly mum," Hermione groaned with a roll of her eyes. "At the very least he's good at keeping secrets, which has got to count for something, right? He's always been able to keep gifts secret, just like that time he surprised me with a trip to the natural history museum for my birthday even though he wanted to go just as badly."

"You went to a museum for your birthday?" Harry asked.

"I know, Harry, that doesn't sound like the most fun thing in the world for you. But remember, I'm interested in that kinda stuff. It's fun for me."

"I wasn't questioning why you went," Harry countered. "I was just asking because that just sounds like an odd thing to do for a birthday. If that's what's fun for you, then by all means, do it. I just thought it sounded odd, that's all."

"And what, pray tell, would you do for your birthday?" she asked with a single raised eyebrow.

Harry shrugged in response. "I haven't really thought about it," he replied honestly. "I haven't been able to do much for my birthdays...ever. This holiday is the best thing anyone's done for me anywhere near my birthday. Unless you count the World Cup, of course. But that turned kinda messy, remember?"

"It did?" Ellen asked. "What do you mean, 'messy'? All Hermione told us was that there was a bit of a commotion after the game. Is that what you're talking about?"

Harry's eyes darted from Hermione to her mother, both of whom were awaiting his response. "You could say that," he conceded finally. "But it was really just the start to an eventful year," he finished sheepishly.

"Uh, huh," Ellen replied with heavy skepticism. She would just have to corner Harry later in order to learn more about Hermione's life away from her and her husband.

As she finished speaking, Ellen saw the same door that Richard had walked through open once more, and her husband stepped out, accompanied by another man. The pair split after emerging, with the stranger heading off in the direction of the craps tables. Richard, for his part, stopped just outside the door and made eye contact with Remus, who was examining a brochure on the resort's Player's Club. With a jerk of his head toward the restroom, Richard made his way into that room, followed shortly thereafter by Remus. A moment later, the two stepped out once more, Richard having returned to his normal appearance.

"I think that's our cue," Ellen stated, cashing out her meager winning and rising from her seat. After a visit to one of the various cash machines scattered about the casino floor, the trio met up with Remus, Richard, Sirius, and Minerva, who were waiting near one of

the side exits from the building. Like most other Las Vegas resorts, The Merlin utilized several entrances and exits from the casino floor.

"So how'd it go?" Harry asked as the group reconvened.

"Less than well," Richard replied as they emerged from the building to face the sinking Las Vegas sun. "But that's really a discussion for another time. Maybe over supper, since it's getting there fast."

"A little hesitant to talk about it?" Sirius ribbed. "Didn't go all too well, did it?"

"That's enough Padfoot," Remus chided. "He said he'd talk about it later, so we'll let him do just that."

"How'd you make out though?" Richard asked his wife, changing the subject to the gambling she had done while he was undercover.

"I made about ten dollars. Not great," she added, "but enough to buy a few litres of petrol when we get home."

"Are you really expecting your winnings to make it home with us? They'll probably find their way back into a machine or onto a table before the day's out."

"I just figured if I denied it, maybe it wouldn't happen," she jested. "But, not to change the subject, what are we doing? It just seems like we're standing here." She was right. After leaving the Merlin, the group had, in essence, remained stationary as the various members joked around. "No offense," Ellen continued, "but I don't really fancy going back to the rooms just yet. We were just there, and I'm sure there are better options for food in a city like this. Maybe we could try wandering around and see what's what?"

"Sure," Sirius agreed with a shrug. "I've been hankerin-"

"You did not just say that," Harry groaned.

"Anyway, I've been hankerin," Sirius repeated, smiling directly at Harry, "to try some of the places here. Granted, I can pretty much say that I've seen all there is on this side of our hotel, just by virtue of walking to and from The Merlin. Of course, I haven't actually been in them, but I'm a smart bloke. I already know what's inside."

"Do you now?" Remus asked. "Then please, enlighten me."

"Another time perhaps," Sirius promised hollowly. "But I don't think it'll do any harm to wander around on the other side of where we're staying for a change. It'd give us a change of scenery at the very least."

Richard waved his hand as if to cede control to Sirius. "Well then, by all means, lead the way."

"Gladly."

And so, Sirius set off toward the MGM, the rest of the group in tow.

"Think he has any clue where he's going?" Hermione asked as they fell into formation behind Richard and Ellen.

"Not a chance in hell," Harry replied.

"Harry!" she hissed.

"What?"

"Watch your language! I don't need my mum hearing you talk like that."

"Oh, really?" Harry asked, his curiosity piqued. "And why, pray tell, would that be?"

"I don't want her to think that I'd be friends...or anything with someone who talks like that!" she stammered, trying to find the right words.

"But I've heard your dad talk like that, and I've only known him for a week. I can only imagine what he's like the rest of the time. Yet your mum seems to like him just fine."

"But it's still not an image I want her, or my dad, to have of me. See, while there was a bit of...course language tossed around as I was growing up, it was almost like expensive seasoning to a conversation. But my parents kinda raised me to not talk like that. They always maintained that if you use language like that, your

vocabulary is quite limited, since you can't come up with something better to say. That always seemed to fit with me, the studious one, so I worked on improving my vocabulary more. So please, can you at least try to watch your language? At least around my parents and me? I'd really appreciate it."

Harry studied her carefully as the glow of the sinking sun framed her chestnut curls in a majestic radiance, her eyes wide in pleading. He just couldn't deny her request, especially given the way she looked at that moment. Not again, he reminded himself. It's just a trick of light, that's all.

"Sure, Hermione," he replied. "I'll do it...for you." He wrapped his arm around her torso and pulled her tight against his side in what he hoped was an innocent one-armed hug. However, she, in turn, laid her head on his shoulder briefly as he did so.

"Thanks, Harry," she whispered.

Harry held them in that comfortable position briefly as they continued to walk. The fact that they were bringing up the rear of the group meant that they had greater leeway with which to act, without fear of embarrassment. However, as soon as he realized this fact, Harry released his grip on Hermione, who seemed to tentatively step away, as she straightened her snug tee. And it was perfectly timed, too, as the group stopped at a crossing, gathering together once more. At this point, they were directly across from the MGM, and crossing this final street would bring them to their hotel.

"Have any idea on where you want to go yet, Sirius?" Harry asked somewhat awkwardly.

"We haven't even reached our hotel yet, cub," Sirius replied. "How would I know already? But since it won't really be supper time for another hour or so, I almost think we have enough time to explore a bit; see some of the other casinos and see what they have to offer. I can tell you one thing, I don't want to eat at that restaurant at The Merlin...what was it called again?"

"Merlin's Cauldron?" Minerva supplied helpfully, having remembered the name from her previous scouting of the resort.

"Yeah, that's it. I don't trust Lucius not to poison his guests, especially if he has an inkling that I'm there."

The signal changed to allow the group, and the pedestrians on the other side of the street, to cross.

"Wouldn't he target Harry first?" Hermione asked.

"That's a rosy prospect," Richard muttered. "Just makes the boy out to have a giant target painted on his back."

"Hermione, Hermione, Hermione," Sirius scolded lightly with a shake of his head. "My ego won't allow me to accept that anyone could target someone else before me. I'm just too devilishly handsome,-"

"Yeah, that's it," Remus murmured.

"-charismatic, and too much of an all-around good guy for the baddies not to target."

"Right," she said patronizingly.

"So, anyway," he continued, "we're finally past the MGM, so now we're into new territory? What new adventures lie just over the horizon?"

"Stop with the theatrics will you?" Remus complained. "It's not funny, nor is it even remotely dramatic. It's just pathetic, really."

"Well," Richard began, trying to strike up a meaningful conversation, "we've got New York New York over there," he nodded toward the faux cityscape.

"No," Ellen shot him down immediately. "New York food isn't distinctive at all. It's just a mix of everyone else's food. Try again."

"Alright..." Richard continued. "There's that big glass...thing over there," he pointed to the large, modern-looking glass complex next to New York New York.

"The Aria," Hermione informed the rest of the group.

"How do you know that?" Harry asked.

"It says so on the building," she pointed out obviously.

Harry squinted and found that the resort was indeed known as The Aria. "So what can you tell me about it then?" he pressed.

"Absolutely nothing," she replied instantly.

"Next then," Harry concluded.

"My, aren't we a picky lot tonight?" Richard complained.

"No, we're just particular," Ellen retorted.

"What about there?" Sirius asked, pointing ahead at a scale model of the Eiffel Tower.

"Paris?" Richard asked in confusion. "Why in the world would you want to go there? We live right across from France itself! Why would you want to go to a cheap imitation?"

"Hey!" Sirius exclaimed, throwing up his hands in his own defense, "I was just making a suggestion. At least it'll be neutral and something that we're used to. Besides, we don't even know what the restaurants in these places are like. We're making judgments without knowing all of the facts."

"Wow, Sirius, that was deep," Harry joked. "Normally you're the one to jump feet-first into a situation, wand blazing."

"Oh, you're a real jokester, Harry," Sirius replied sarcastically. "But I'm serious-

"We know," Remus interrupted.

"Will everyone stop interrupting me?" Sirius paused to look around the group. "Thank you. Now, I figured that we could just go inside, take a look around, and see if anything strikes our fancy."

"For once, Mr. Black, you actually make some sense," Minerva interjected, speaking for the first time in a long while. "I don't know that it will do much harm to simply look around inside. At the very

least we'll find something that is at least somewhat neutral and will be fine for everyone."

The rest of the group begrudgingly accepted the proposal, which seemed to carry greater credibility with the wizened Minerva behind it. That decided, they entered what appeared to be the front entrance of Paris, located behind one of the lefts of the miniature Eiffel Tower.

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"What about there?" Sirius asked, pointing to yet another restaurant located inside Paris. This was the third time he had suggested a particular restaurant, and each of the previous two times, he had been shot down.

"Well, at least this one looks kinda...normal," Richard observed. Despite the fact that he had lived in Britain his entire life, he had never acquired much fondness for French cuisine. The other two restaurants that Sirius had suggested both seemed to be too...French for his tastes. This one however, known as Les Artistes Steakhouse, seemed like it served food that he found more palatable.

"Have you looked at the menu, Richard?" Ellen asked shrilly, reading the one posted in the window.

"No," he replied as he walked up to her side and glanced at the menu. Sure enough, he found prices that were consistent with his expectations for an upscale restaurant. However, despite their income, the Grangers did not frequent restaurants of such high cost. "It does look a bit pricey," he admitted, glancing at Sirius.

"But what isn't?" Sirius asked rhetorically. "I didn't bring money on this trip to look good whenever I open the safe in my room. I brought it to spend. I intend to spend every last bit of the money I brought. It's not doing me any good sitting in a vault at home, and I kinda want to get rid of it, since a lot of it is blood money from my family's past."

"Really?" Ellen asked, now curious.

"Yeah, but that's a story for another time," Sirius replied. "Trust me, it's a long story. But for now, let me do this for you. Come on, price isn't an issue."

The two adult Grangers made eye contact briefly before Ellen finally sighed and nodded slightly.

"Fine with us," Richard announced. "But what about the rest of you lot?" He looked around at the rest.

"I'm not a big fan of seafood," Harry informed them as he stepped forward to look at the map. "Granted, that may be because my last experience with it came from some burnt bass Aunt Petunia made. Uncle Vernon raved about it, naturally. But it was bloody—" his eyes quickly darted to Hermione, "pretty awful," he corrected. "But it looks like there's at least something other than seafood, so I'm fine with it."

Agreement was garnered from the other members of the group. Happy with this decision, Sirius made for the door, only to be beaten by a young couple, who opened the door and rushed inside before Sirius had the chance.

"Well that was rude," Sirius commented idly. "But at least someone else thinks this place is a good idea." He opened the door and led the way inside, finding a small reception desk just inside. A lone man followed the group inside, adding credence to Sirius's theory about the quality of the restaurant.

"Table for...seven, please," Richard said, taking the lead from Sirius as the hostess greeted them. "Under Granger."

The hostess looked at her map briefly before looking back up at Richard. "Actually, Mr. Granger, I can seat you right now. It's actually been kinda slow tonight; weekday night and all that. So if you'll follow Julian here." She nodded toward the young man standing next to her, dressed in the classic, yet elegant combination of a white shirt and solid black tie.

Richard shrugged and did as she suggested, leading the group into the dining room and allowing the next customer, the lone man who had entered after the group, to ask for his table.

"Table for one, please," he said as the Granger party left, "under Daltrey."

"So what's everyone gonna have?" Richard asked, trying to strike up a conversation around the table. Ever since they had been handed their menus, the members of the party had been too engrossed in reading it to make any sort of small talk.

"I'm thinking the filet," Harry said. "Twelve ounces, of course."

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed from the other side of the table as she looked at the price. "Did you even look at the price of that?"

"Hermione," Sirius interjected from his seat next to Harry, "this is my treat. Harry can have whatever he wants. I personally think it's a great choice myself. But if you want to see something expensive, you should see what I'm getting. I'm thinking of getting a ten ounce Kobe."

Hermione looked at her menu, and her eyes bugged out as soon as she looked at the price of Sirius's meal.

"So a forty-five dollar steak for Harry here is nothing compared to my hundred and fifty dollar steak," Sirius concluded. "I really don't care either way. Just get whatever you want and I'll be more than happy to pay for it. This is my treat, remember? After all, this is supposed to be a holiday, so can't we just enjoy ourselves for a bit without having to worry about anything?"

Hermione begrudgingly accepted his logic and continued on her quest to find her ideal entrée. "I guess I'm just not too keen on the red meats," she admitted, ignoring that section of the menu completely.

Harry had never known this about Hermione, and had to call her on it. "What do you mean? Is it the whole hunting thing?" he asked timidly, not wanting to trample on any potential political views. But to his relief, Hermione shook her head in the negative.

"Nah, it's just that I don't really like the taste. It always seems a bit too...meaty, if you get what I'm saying."

To be honest, Harry really didn't understand where she was coming from, but then again, he rarely got the opportunity to partake of the finer meats. But he had to be honest with her. "Not really," he admitted. "But to each their own, I guess. I really don't care if you don't like the taste, so long as you don't get too preachy on me about eating it."

"Now when have I ever been 'preachy' with you?" she asked, making direct eye contact with him.

Under her unwavering gaze, Harry didn't have the heart to mention the various situations where she had preached the virtues of studying, paying greater attention in class, or better organization. And he especially didn't have the heart to bring up her obsession with freeing the house-elves that she had, thankfully, seemed to grow out of, at least somewhat.

"I wasn't referring to one situation in particular," he replied timidly. "I was just talking...in principle. That's all."

"Right..." she said as the waiter arrived to take their orders. In the end, Hermione chose a simple chicken breast with a potato gnocchi and mushrooms. Harry had to admit that it sounded good, but was still satisfied with his selection. After all, if he was given the opportunity to eat well, he was going to take it.

After the waiter had left, Harry brought up the events of the day once more.

"So now that we're here," he began, addressing Richard, "should we talk about what went on earlier?"

Richard played with his napkin briefly before setting it back on the table. "Well, I can't say it went particularly brilliantly," he admitted. "Well, I can say it went swimmingly to start with, that much is certain. Sirius, Minerva, your ploy to get me in there worked great. I think I kinda cocked up inside though."

"How so?" Ellen asked, concerned.

"Well, I guess I'll just tell the whole story. I got inside and found a long, wide hall that sloped down, going underground. At the end, it branched in two, with a door to an employee break room in the

middle. The left side hall didn't really have much except offices, maintenance rooms such as the ventilation control room, and parking garage access. Most of these doors were not locked by keycard, since they aren't really that important. The other hall, however, was a different story. This hallway, while shorter, had more doors with keycard sliders. This hall housed the security office, which looked like it could only be opened by a keycard with the right authorization level. That's a problem, but I'll talk about it later. Anyway, I looked around in this hall a bit and found an elevator at the end. But at this point, I was found by a pit boss, who didn't buy my excuse of losing my keycard, and escorted me back onto the casino floor. But not until he had inadvertently revealed that the elevator led to the vault. I'm really kicking myself now for not using the invisibility cloak. But I just couldn't find a spot to put it on without being spotted by the cameras. And there's also the fact that it would still look odd for doors to open and close with nobody going through. So really, all I found out was that there are levels to the keycards and where the door to the vault is."

"Well, at least that's something," Harry commented, trying to accentuate the positive. "At least we know what's back there now."

"But it throws a wrench into everything," Richard informed him. "We can't just go and steal a keycard from anyone now, since they all seem to have various access levels."

"Well, wasn't that the case before?" Remus pointed out. "I thought we decided we couldn't take a keycard in the first place?"

"True, but it was still an option that was on the table if we really wanted to use it. I also saw a lot of cameras back there too, so it seems that they take their security in the back of the house just as seriously as on the casino floor. Oh, and I also talked with a real security guard, and he told me that the head of security for the resort is a bit of a wanker. Of course, I don't think this person knows about magic, but he said that the head of security, someone named Baldrek, doesn't really do much. So that might work in our favor."

"Okay, then what do we do?" Harry asked. "We can't just wander around without being spotted, that much is obvious, since the cameras will see us."

"We could knock out the cameras," Hermione suggested.

"And how do we do that?" Richard asked. "I'm gonna assume, based on the few things I saw, that the security office would have control over those, and we can't get in there. So I'm not sure what we can do. And then there's the problem of getting off of the casino floor again the first place. I doubt we can run the same ploy all over again."

There was silence around the table as the various members of the group considered their plight. "Why do we have to force our way in?" Minerva asked finally.

"In order to find that...item," Sirius replied with slight sarcasm.

"No, I think I see what she's on about," Hermione said excitedly. "I mean, it would let us in, but what if we got them to literally open every door for us?"

"How so?" Sirius asked, now intrigued.

"We get them to evacuate the resort," she answered simply.

"Well that's easy," Remus responded with biting sarcasm.

"Watch the tone there, Moony," Sirius chided, "there are ladies present. Besides, all we have to do is come up with some kind of disaster, and everything'll be golden."

"Really, Padfoot?" Remus asked. "Then humor me. What would your grand scheme be?"

"An explosion," Sirius replied with a shrug.

"So you wanna blow up The Merlin?" Remus whispered, looking around the restaurant to make sure there were no eavesdroppers. However, all of the couples around them seemed engaged in their own conversation, and there was only one table with a single occupant, and they seemed engrossed in their menu.

"Well, it would be easier to access the vault if the entire resort was one giant hole in the ground," Sirius opined.

"Yes, and that'd be a very clean result, wouldn't it?"

"I wasn't serious, you berk," Sirius said. "But an explosion would work, I think."

"No it wouldn't," Richard offered. "Trust me, I've seen enough emergency policies and evacuation plans for businesses to know that they don't evacuate for just anything, even an explosion. You'd literally have to, like Sirius suggested, blow the whole place up. So long as the building is still structurally sound, it'll still be occupied. The same thing goes for a fire, or any other kind of disaster. So, unless everyone in the resort is threatened, they won't evacuate."

"And you're sure that'd happen here?" Sirius questioned.

"Absolutely," Richard replied emphatically. "Think of it this way: how much money does a resort stand to lose if it evacuates? First of all, there's the gambling time that's lost, so that revenue is gone. Then, there's the fact that the people who evacuate are likely to go to another casino, instead of going right back inside after the evacuation is over. They want to continue to gamble...right now. It's all about instant gratification. But the other problem is bad publicity. If a resort has to evacuate, it looks like they aren't in control of what's going on within their own property, so it generates bad word of mouth. All of this added together means that evacuating a major Las Vegas resort is, literally, a last resort."

As he finished speaking, Richard spotted their waiter returning to the table, food in hand. "I think," Richard began, "that it might be better if we continued this conversation later. It seems to be heading in an...unsavory direction."

July 25, 2011

8:49 PM

The Signature at MGM Grand, Room 816

"I have to say, Sirius," Richard began as he threw himself on the couch in McGonagall's room, "that was a brilliant meal. I'm glad you talked us into it, so thanks."

"No problem," Sirius replied as he took a seat at one of the chairs that surrounded the small dining table. "Does anyone remember where we left off?"

"Oh, you mean when we were talking about blowing up the hotel?" Remus asked sarcastically.

Sirius nodded fervently. "Yeah, that's it. I still think it's a bloody good idea myself, but I don't know about you lot."

"I still think it's a bloody terrible idea," Remus countered, "for all the points that Richard here argued back at the restaurant. Granted, now that I think about it, that might not have been the best place to be talking about something like blowing up a building."

"Why?" Sirius asked. "It's not like there was anyone from The Merlin or any of Malfoy's cronies there watching us."

"But how would you react, Mr. Black, if you were enjoying your supper when the group at the next table over started to talk about bombs and blowing up buildings?" Minerva challenged. "I'd say you'd be quite likely to report it, wouldn't you?"

Sirius shrugged. "Maybe. But what's done is done. Now we have to figure out what to do."

"We don't have the manpower or resources for a smash and grab job anyway," Richard observed. "It would be impractical and foolish to even try."

"Where'd you learn that term?" Ellen asked her husband. "You haven't been secretly gallivanting around behind my back as some kind of master thief, have you?"

Richard winked at her mysteriously. "Some secrets are better kept secret- ow!" He recoiled slightly as he grabbed his side where Ellen had just elbowed him. "No, dear," he said, correcting himself.

"That's better," Ellen said smugly. "You probably got it from a film anyway, with all the time you spend watching them."

"Ocean's Eleven, actually," Richard informed her. "So anyway, we can't pull off some daring heist or anything like that that involves us

blowing things up and making some exciting escape. We aren't professional thieves, we're just a pair of dentists and a group of mismatched witches and wizards. This'll be great..." he groaned.

"Don't be so negative, Richard," Ellen chided. "Granted, it does seem a bit as though the odds are stacked against us, but don't get so depressed until it's really necessary."

"As fun as this conversation is," Harry interjected, "maybe we should actually try to come up with some ideas? I, for one, don't really like the idea of Voldemort keeping hold of something that will, in essence, let him live forever. I don't know about you, but that's not something I intend to let him keep."

"So then what's your idea?" Richard asked, his voice laced with curiosity and a hint of sarcasm.

Harry shrugged. "I dunno, really. But I do like the idea of getting the place to evacuate. You said that, normally, the only way a place of that size would evacuate is if the entire population is in danger, or if it just wasn't safe to be inside?" Richard nodded. "Then what if we created such a situation?"

"And how do you propose we put thousands of innocent people in danger?" Richard pressed. "It almost seems like you're disregarding the concept of collateral damage. I thought we were supposed to be the good guys here?"

"False danger," Hermione announced. "We could create false danger. I think that's what Harry was referring to daddy, right Harry?" She looked at her friend to find him nodding slightly. He shot her a grateful smile, which she returned with her own bright smile.

"That's what I meant," Harry continued, picking up from where he had left off. "We don't actually have to put people in danger, we just have to give them the impression that they are in danger. We need to create a panic, to put it differently. But the danger doesn't have to be real. We just have to use something that seems like it'll put people in danger. The only question is what people will think would be dangerous and would create a panic."

He looked around the room briefly as he received no responses to his question. That was, until Hermione spoke up.

"A gas leak," she said quietly.

"Perfect," Harry replied loud enough for the rest to hear. However, Hermione's suggestion had been too quiet for the others.

"What was that?" Sirius asked.

"A gas leak," Hermione said louder. "We could make everyone think that there's some kind of gas leak. All we have to do is make the air smell like gas. It doesn't have to be real gas or even be dangerous, it just has to smell like gas."

"But is that really enough to incite a panic?" Ellen asked thoughtfully. "I mean, I remember learning some chemistry back at uni, and if I remember correctly, a building basically needs to be completely airtight and ready to burst with gas before it'll explode."

"Yes, but how many people know that?" Hermione posed. "It might seem logical, even rational. But since when has the general public been rational?"

"I kinda see where this is going now," Richard interjected. "And she does have a point. Besides, are you really suggesting that we scare people with the danger of blowing up? No. I'm assuming you're talking about scaring people with the possibility of dying by gas exposure. There's a reason that they make gas smell so bad: it's poisonous. So, and this is pure speculation, I'm assuming that your plan is to mimic the smell of gas, but not the poisonous properties of it?"

"Right," Harry said, nodding. "That's all I'm saying. But the smell'd have to be pretty strong to make people think they're gonna die because they're breathing it."

"I'm sure there's something we could brew that'd do that," Remus suggested. "I'm no potions master by any stretch of the imagination, but I can hold my own. We could probably just use some perfume potion as a base and go from there, since you want the main purpose of this thing to be smell."

"Wait," Richard interrupted, "I still don't know that this'll work, so I don't think we should get too ahead of ourselves with planning it. I've

been in plenty of places that smell like gas and nobody's running out for their lives. So what would make this different? I mean, I go into shops, even grocers sometimes that smell like gas, and I don't see anybody panicking. Sure, I might overhear some random customer complaining about it to an employee, but that's not nearly the same. How would this be any different?"

"We could blow something up," Sirius replied seriously.

"No, no, no," Richard groaned, "not this again—"

"Hold on a second," Harry began. "He could have a point. What if we did create an explosion inside the casino...after the gas is being smelled by everyone? Forget the fact that it's not physically possible for that little gas in that big of a space to ignite. People don't really know that, as Hermione already said. A small explosion or two could trigger a panic, whereas just gas might not."

"'Whereas', Harry?" Sirius asked. "You almost sound like you're growing up. Or that Hermione here's rubbing off on you. I can't decide which it is."

"You're a lecherous old man, Sirius," Harry replied. "But the point still stands. An explosion might be just what we need to make people panic."

"But what then?" Richard asked. "So we get all of the guests on the casino floor to panic. How does that help us? The resort staff won't be part of the panic, at least not all of them. So how would this distraction let us into the security office? I'm still not seeing the connection."

"How would a regular business respond to a panic?" Minerva asked the group, rather than Richard in particular. "If you owned the resort, how would you have your employees react to a massive panic by your guests, should one occur?"

Richard shrugged. "Well, the last thing I'd want is for my customers to panic, obviously. It hurts business for all the reasons I talked about back at the restaurant. So there is that to consider. If that were my main consideration, I'd get my employees to try and control the panic."

"How?" she challenged.

"I dunno," he replied. "Getting them to herd everybody back inside would be pointless because, even they could do it, nobody would want to play anymore. But I think, at best, the staff could try and convince the guests that there's nothing to worry about, that there's no danger in the first place."

"And that's probably the same thing that Mr. Malfoy would have his staff do, or at least what they're already trained to do, in such a situation. So that begs the question, how could we use such a distraction to our own ends?"

"Shouldn't we be looking at this the other way around?" Richard asked. "I mean, we're looking at it almost like we have to go with a certain plan, and finding ways for it to suit our needs. I think it might be better to figure out what our needs are, then come up with a plan that fits them."

"It might be," Harry conceded, "but we still have an idea, and it's one that I think is a pretty good one at that. It also happens to address some of the problems we need to take care of, so I don't think we should scrap it just yet. Now, onto Minerva's question: if the staff is running around trying to control the panic, I'm sure the security staff will be part of that attempt. So I'm sure they'll be going in and out of the security office, so the door will be opening and closing. All we need in that case is to be positioned just right with my cloak, and we're in."

"Then what?" Remus asked, pressing him for further details.

"I haven't gotten that far yet," Harry admitted. "But at the very least I think it'd be a good idea to start with the whole gas idea. I'm sure that if we place explosives at just the right spots, such as near a waste can where matches and lit cigarettes go, it'll sell the entire idea."

"I'll have to talk to Severus to see what we'll need," Remus informed everyone. "Under ideal circumstances, he'd be the one to brew it—"

"But he wouldn't leave the safety and security of the convent over there for long enough to do us a favor," Sirius finished derisively.

"Well, I would have put it a bit differently, but that sounds about right."

"So it sounds like some shopping's in order?" Ellen asked, her eyes lighting up at the prospect.

"Magical shopping," Harry responded. "Shopping for potion ingredients, nothing exciting." He was purposefully trying to bring her down from her excitement. The last thing he wanted was to be involved in another shopping trip that was in any way similar to the last.

"Oh," she replied, deflated. But she quickly perked back up again. "But we could go anyway," she continued. "I haven't ever really spent much time in a magical apothecary, outside of the one in Diagon Alley. And those visits are always quite short anyway, since it's so busy right before term starts; we just want to get in and out as fast as possible."

"I think that's something we can worry about in the morning," Richard announced, as he glanced at the clock to find that it was quickly approaching ten o'clock. "I don't want to speak for anyone else, but I'm knackered."

"You really have no stamina in your old age, you know that?" Ellen teased as she rose from her seat, taking the cue from her husband. However, her comment was not received as innocently as she intended, as Richard raised a single eyebrow at her in curiosity. Ellen rolled her eyes and shook her head, deciding not to dignify him with a verbal response. "Good night, everyone," she said as she made her way to the door.

As the door closed behind the pair of Grangers, Remus stood and stretched slightly, indicating that he too was preparing to leave.

"I'll send Severus a patronus and ask him to prepare a list of supplies," Minerva told him. "Hopefully we should have it by morning."

"Thanks, Minerva," he told her as he approached the door.

She then turned her attention to the teens as Sirius began to follow Remus. "And you two," she began, "had better get going as well.

From the sounds of it, Harry, you had a late night last night, and I don't want you to suffer the consequences of another."

"Really?" Sirius asked with great interest. "And what were you doing until the wee hours of the morning, eh Harry?"

"Playing with my computer," Harry replied, his face flush with embarrassment. "What else did you think I'd be doing?"

The smile on Sirius's face dropped at Harry's response. "Just asking," he replied sullenly as he opened the door. "Sleep well tonight, though," he added as he left the room.

"One of these days that tongue of his is gonna get him in trouble," Harry muttered.

"Oh, trust me, Harry," Minerva said, "it has...many times over the years. But you're right. It will continue to do so as well."

End of Chapter 10

A/N: Thank you all for reading chapter 10. I will say that the response to chapter 9 was somewhat tepid, but that may be partially due to the fact that I was coming off of receiving a large number of reviews for chapter 8. Aside from that, there are a couple of things to talk about here.

First off, let me congratulate the reviewers who correctly guessed the title of this chapter: Chaotic Courtney, and luvsanime02.

Contrary to what some of you may think, I do take suggestions and reviews into account when writing. For example, one recent review mentioned the fact that Hermione's parents are annoying. I can certainly see how that could be the case. Trust me, that was not my intention, so I am changing (very slightly) how they act. I will say that there will be one more wave of deep conversations about the Harry/Hermione relationship in chapter 12, but beyond that, I don't plan for any more. At that point, the dancing will be over, and everyone will have made up their minds. Of course, part of the reason for that is that chapter 12 marks the end of act two of the story, and makes way for act three, when everything starts to happen. But don't worry, there will still be some Harry/Hermione goodness here and there before we get to the big payoff, which I am

saving for the end of this story. I simply believe that, while there is a time and a place for a good parent/child chat like we've seen so far, one does eventually reach a point where they get a little tiring. I don't want those conversations to overstay their welcome, which is why they will be rarer and rarer, and will eventually disappear entirely.

Another anonymous review mentioned that Sirius was too childlike, annoying, and in no way funny. I do have a plan to develop the character of Sirius slightly over the course of the series, and that begins in chapter 12.

In total, I do apologize for the somewhat long wait for this chapter. My productivity has slowed, and it took me nearly a week to write chapter 12 due to other papers and work I had to complete. I also spent a good deal of time working on the overarching plot of this series, and I seem to have most of it hammered out at this point.

Chapter Title Hint: So far, Harry's had himself a real good time, and in general, he feels alive. However, what happens when he meets Mr. Daltrey? Will he stop him, or will he help him? Another hint would be that Top Gear declared it the best driving song of all time, so there is that as well.

Thank you for reading this far and I hope you continue to enjoy the story. Please leave me a review if you like what you read, since nothing helps me write faster than lots of reviews. Thank you again and I'll see you soon with chapter 11.

Chp11